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THE EARLY LITERARY CAREER OF ROBERT BROWNING

University of Virginia
Barbour-Page Foundation

THE EARLY LITERARY CAREER OF ROBERT BROWNING

FOUR LECTURES

BY

THOMAS R. LOUNSBURY, L.H.D., LL.D.

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in the series of lectures some fresh aspect or aspects of the department of thought in which he is a specialist; and that the entire series delivered each session, taken together, shall possess such unity that they may be published by the Foundation in book form.

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I

"PAULINE" AND "PARACELSUS"

I purpose in the present course of lectures to give an account of the literary career of Robert Browning from the publication of his first poem in 1833 to his marriage and departure for Italy in 1846. The story of the works he produced during this period demands, of course, recital; but the principal aim which I have had in view is to bring out distinctly how he struck his contemporaries; to make clear the causes that transformed the cordial welcome he received during the fourth decade of the last century into the indifference and neglect which waited upon him during the decades immediately following; and, finally, to make manifest the nature of the agencies which brought about the remarkable and peculiar revival of his reputation during the closing years of his life. Accordingly, it is his literary career that comes almost exclusively under consideration. Only so far as it bears upon the

comprehension of that are any records given of his personal life. Most even of this little will be found comprised in the opening lecture.

Criticism of the work he produced during this period is necessarily involved in any discussion of his career. But there has been no intention to go into it largely, far less exhaustively. About the value or correctness of what of it is here given there will assuredly be difference of opinion. The inferences drawn, the views expressed, are likely to encounter the dissent of many of you, perhaps even of most of you. At all events, I have not needed to come to this university to find those who deem them wrong and some who call them abominable. The justice of critical conclusions must be left to time to determine, when the likes and dislikes of the present, its fancies and its fashions, have passed out of recognition and almost out of remembrance.

But though the future can test most satisfactorily the truth of opinion, it is usually at a disadvantage in testing the truth of fact. It is for the present to detect and expose falsity of statement, before frequency of repetition has hardened the general mind into settled beliefs which, through laziness or indifference, men re-

fuse ever after to discard or even modify. While, therefore, I ask no one to accept the judgments here expressed, I think I may venture to insist that the facts I shall give in controverted matters cannot be successfully disputed. This is a point of some importance, because about certain events in the poet's career there has already begun to gather a mass of mythical statement, which is found duly recorded in the accounts furnished of his life. It is all the more important to correct it now, because certain of these erroneous assertions have for their support the authority of Browning himself. Some explanation of this sort it seemed desirable to premise before entering, as I now do, upon the main subject itself.

Robert Browning first appeared as an author in the early part of 1833. He was born on May 7, 1812, in Southampton Street, Camberwell, a borough on the southern side of the Thames. Accordingly, at the time of his first venture into literature he had not yet attained his majority. As a general rule, to which there are not many exceptions, poetical genius develops early. Not infrequently, too, it exhausts itself early. Few are the great poets who have reached a rea-

sonably advanced age whose best work has not been composed mainly in the first half of their lives. Their later production shows no advance upon the earlier: more often it indicates distinct retrogression. This is not altogether true of either Browning or Tennyson; but even of them it is in great measure true.

The boy grew up in a home populous with books; for his father, a clerk in the Bank of England, was in his way a good deal of a scholar. The son, with literary tastes keenly marked, began early to produce poems. These, fortunately perhaps for the peace of our generation, have disappeared. They were largely written under the influence of Byron, who, for the whole period of his literary activity, was what he described himself as being for a while, "the grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme." To him all poetical aspirants then yielded homage in the form of imitation, conscious or unconscious.

The father's tastes in literature were in sympathy mainly with the old poetic school of the eighteenth century which was dying out, or had already died out, if properly any school can ever be said to die out which has had any real reason for existing at all. Naturally much of the pro-

duction of the time which was slowly emerging into public notice, would not be found upon the shelves of his library. In consequence, it was a good deal of a revelation to the boy when he came to know that such a poet as Shelley had even existed. With considerable difficulty he succeeded in procuring most of the dead author's then little read books. The influence of this writer affected him profoundly, and, as it seems to me, not altogether happily. It operated to strengthen tendencies and to exaggerate characteristics which, in his case, stood in need of repression and lessening. In particular, the vagueness which pervades much of Shelley's poetry had assuredly no effect in correcting that disposition toward obscurity, not necessarily in his ideas, but in the expression of his ideas, which remained to the last Browning's besetting literary sin.

It was in the autumn of 1832 while fully under the influence of this author that he composed his first printed work. His father, proud as he was of his son's talents, had no disposition to sink money in the publication of the poem. It is not impossible, brought up as he had been in the old school of versification, that he failed to understand it. Nor, in fact, was it then a favorable

time for bringing out poetry of any sort whatever. The great Georgian intellectual outburst had spent itself. It had been followed by one of those regularly recurring periods in the history of literature when the human mind seems for a while to need to lie fallow as a result of previous overproduction. As any one, the literary public had lost its relish for the food which it had once eagerly craved, and had not yet found another kind to suit its altered taste. The public had become satiated with verse. They not merely refused to read it, they refused to buy it. There was this justification for their attitude that most of what then came out was not worth either reading or buying. It was frequently asserted and asserted by the professional critics that the day for poetry was past. Accordingly, without the prerequisite of paying for its production, no publisher would think of allowing his name to go upon the title-page of almost any book of verse, least of all upon that of an unsold author who was as yet little more than a boy. So most of Browning's harvest came forward in this manner and undertook to bear the expense. Accordingly, early in 1833 a little volume of about seventy pages made its appearance, bear-

ing the imprint of Saunders, Otley & Co., a firm in Conduit Street. It was entitled, "Pauline, or the Fragment of a Confession."

The poem contained over a thousand lines of blank verse, fully as mystical as any and a good deal more mystical than much that Browning subsequently wrote. It was anonymous and the secret of its authorship was long maintained. A copy of this original edition is now one of the rarest of volumes. In 1890 it was said that only five were known to exist; and it is still safe to assert that the pretty thorough search which has gone on since that time has not succeeded in tripling the number. Accordingly, when one does appear in the market it commands a price absurdly disproportionate to its actual value. In January, 1896, a copy containing on the fly-leaf some observations upon the poem by the poet himself was sold by auction and brought the comfortable sum of one hundred and forty-five pounds. It is mainly those who never read poetry that can afford to pay such prices for it.

Browning, who at this period combined with the dove-like guilelessness of youth something of the craft of the serpent, paved the way him-

self for one fairly favorable notice of the coming book. William Johnson Fox, preacher, orator, and essayist, was then a potent power in a not inconsiderable section of the literary world. He was at that time the editor of *The Monthly Repository*, a Unitarian periodical, which he was trying to divest of its theological character and replace by one more distinctly literary and political. To him Browning, while still a boy, had been introduced by a female friend named Eliza Flower. She was the elder of two sisters, one of whom, more easily recognized by her married name of Sarah Flower Adams, is well known to the religious world by her hymn beginning "Nearer, My God, to Thee." Eliza Flower was a musician, and attained no mean reputation as a composer of music. With this refined and highly gifted woman, nine years his senior, the youthful Browning did the wisest and most creditable thing he could do as a boy by falling in love. She died at a comparatively early age; but to the last day of his life the poet cherished her memory with peculiar tenderness. To Fox, Eliza Flower had shown a collection of short poems written by her boy-admirer when he was about twelve. To it he had given the name of

Incondita—a title which he might appropriately have applied to a good deal of his later work. The critic did not recommend these pieces for publication, but he recognized in their writer the possession of unquestionable poetic power. The manuscript containing them was entirely destroyed. Much to the grief of his partisans, the copy made by Miss Flower shared the same fate at the hands of the poet, when later in life it came into his possession.

Browning, now about to make his first venture in print, bethought him of the kindly critic of his unpublished early verse. Accordingly he sent him a letter signed with his initials announcing the coming appearance of his poem. It is printed in full by one of his biographers, and though it has been long before the public no one of his admirers seems to be conscious of the fact that never was there a more transparent attempt to secure, under the guise of humility, a favorable review. "Perhaps," wrote he, "by the aid of the subjoined initials and a little reflection you may recollect an oddish sort of boy who had the honor of being introduced to you at Hackney some years back—at that time a sayer of verse and a doer of it, and whose doing you had a little

previously commended after a fashion—(whether in earnest or not, God knows): that individual it is who takes the liberty of addressing one whose slight commendation then was more thought of than all the gun, drum, and trumpet of praise would be now, and to submit to you a free and easy sort of thing which he wrote some months ago 'on one leg' and which comes out this week —having either heard or dreamed that you contribute to *The Westminster*. Should it be found too insignificant for cutting up, I shall no less remain, dear sir, Your most obedient servant, R. B."

This must be considered, if we take the youth of the writer into account, a most skilful device for securing a review of one's work which even if not favorable would not be hostile. A delightful boyishness pervades the whole letter. There is the affected depreciation of the poem itself as a free and easy thing written hastily. Better still is that appreciation of the commendation bestowed by the critic upon the verses produced at that earlier period of life when such praise was worth more to him than thunders of applause would be at the time of writing, now that he had reached, it may be added, his present advanced

age of nearly twenty-one. Nor is there any lack of skill displayed in the suggestion that the book would furnish materials for cutting up in *The Westminster Review.*

The appeal to Fox was successful. It was not, however, in *The Westminster* that his notice of the poem appeared, but in *The Monthly Repository* for April. There he welcomed the work with a warm and unquestionably sincere eulogium. In it he gave distinct expression to his belief that a writer had come who was entitled to be called a poet. He had previously reviewed the volume of 1833 of the then little-known Tennyson with a good deal of enthusiasm. One sentence of this article on "Pauline" is indeed remarkable for its early reference to the two great poets of the Victorian era. "We felt certain of Tennyson," he wrote, "before we saw the book by a few verses which had struggled into a newspaper; we are not the less certain of the author of 'Pauline.'" All of us are wise after the event. Rarely has it been given to one man to foresee and predict the future glory of two great writers of widely diverse gifts, who were then either not known at all or known only to limited circles made up largely of personal friends.

The social and literary influence of Fox was then great. It unquestionably had the effect of procuring for the young and unknown author a favorable hearing in quarters which otherwise would in all probability have paid little heed to his production. Here it is desirable to give a brief account of a certain class of critical periodicals, which, well known as they soon came to be, were then just beginning to influence or direct public opinion; for it was about this period that the weekly had begun to displace the quarterly and the monthly from the supreme position which these had long held as arbiters of literary merit. These weeklies were then, as now, of two classes: the purely literary and the combined literary and political. Five of them occupied at that time a specially prominent position. The oldest of them belonged to the second class. It was *The Examiner*, which had been established in 1808 by John and Leigh Hunt, and was now under the control of the noted journalist, Albany Fonblanque. With him came to be associated in this fourth decade of the century John Forster as literary and dramatic critic. Its main rivals were *The Spectator* and *The Atlas*. The oldest of the other class was *The Literary Gazette*, which had

been founded in 1816. At that time it still retained its lead in the general popular estimate; but its influence was steadily lessening before that of its rival, *The Athenæum*, which had been established in 1828.

From some of these critical periodicals the poem received favorable mention. This was noticeably true of *The Atlas* and *The Athenæum*. The article in the former concluded, indeed, with the declaration that the work had created in the reviewer's mind just so much interest that he would be induced to look with curiosity to the author's next essay. *The Athenæum* was, if anything, even more cordial. It quoted passages from the poem. Still it is evident that the critic saw that for the work as a whole there would be little recognition. In truth, his closing words gave one further example of the universal despondency which had at that time overtaken the English race as to the future of the highest form of literature. "The day is past," he said mournfully, "for either fee or fame in the service of the muse; but to one who sings so naturally, poetry must be as easy as music to the bird, and no doubt it has a solace all its own."

But it must not be supposed that the three periodicals whose opinions have been quoted represent the universal attitude. "Somewhat mystical," ran the criticism in *The Literary Gazette*, "somewhat poetical, somewhat sensual, and not a little unintelligible—this is a dreamy volume without an object and unfit for publication." Even more concisely was the poem described in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, the organ of the Northern Whigs. It is there simply mentioned as "a piece of pure bewilderment." It was this brief and contemptuous notice that forestalled and prevented the publication in the magazine of the review of the poem which John Stuart Mill had prepared for this periodical. But the remark that Mill made on the margin of the book came a few years after to Browning's knowledge and filled him with just pleasure. "Is there not somewhere," he wrote to Miss Barrett, in February, 1845, "the little book I first printed when a boy, with John Mill, the metaphysical head, his marginal note that 'the writer possesses a deeper self-consciousness than I ever knew in a sane human being.'" [1]

[1] "Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett," New York, 1899, vol. I, p. 28.

The point of view, however, is everything. Sanity was the one thing found lacking by the reviewer in *Fraser's Magazine*, the London organ of the Tories. That periodical was then bringing out a series of critical articles entitled, "Poets of the Day." These articles were somewhat contemptuously headed Batch the First, Batch the Second, and so on, as the numbers successively appeared. In spite of the not altogether respectful heading, it is right to remark that the notices were occasionally of a laudatory character. In the number for December, 1833, "Pauline" received attention. The review opens with a citation of the Latin quotation which Browning had placed at the beginning of his book. "*Non dubito quin titulus*, etc.," it said, "quotes the author of 'Pauline' from Cornelius Agrippa; which we, shearing the sentence of its lengthy continuation, translate thus: we are under no kind of doubt about the title to be given to you, my poet, you being, beyond all question, as mad as Cassandra, without any of the power to prophesy like her or to construct a connected sentence like anybody else." The article went on to designate him as the Mad Poet of the Batch; as being mad not in one direction only but in all.

But no review, whether friendly or hostile, could have then or did have the slightest influence upon the sale of "Pauline." None at any rate could have saved the work from oblivion, if left to itself. The poet, toward the close of his life, when Browning societies were in the heyday of their vigor and were scattering his name far and wide, came seemingly to be rather proud of the ill success which according to him had attended his two earliest ventures into poetry. He exaggerated, perhaps unconsciously, the disfavor with which they had been received. Of this work in particular he represented it as being the completest of failures from the point of view of sale. "I willingly repeat," said he in a letter of 1886, "that to the best of my belief no single copy of the original edition of 'Pauline' found a buyer; the book was undoubtedly still-born—and that despite the kindly offices of many friends who did their best to bring about a successful birth." [1] Certainly the fact of his ever having written such a poem soon passed away almost entirely from the memory of men. One reason for this was doubtless that he himself

[1] "Letters from Robert Browning to Various Correspondents," edited by T. J. Wise, London, privately printed, 1896, vol. II, p. 58.

came to have an unfavorable opinion of it. He therefore largely kept to himself the secret of its existence and authorship.

In the course of his intimacy, however, with the woman he was soon to call his wife he had come to disclose the facts. In January, 1846, Miss Barrett wrote to him that she was anxious to have the poem, in fact determined to have it in a day or two. "Must you see 'Pauline'?" he asked almost plaintively. If so, he begged her to wait a few days till he could correct the misprints in it and write its history. It was so evident, indeed, that he was reluctant to have her see it at all that a little later she is found priding herself upon her virtue in not sending for it to the booksellers, before she knew positively whether he would much dislike to have her read it. Browning continued to protest. The poem, he said, was altogether foolish, and it was not boy-like, and he had rather she saw real infantine efforts—verses at six years old, drawings still earlier—anything but this ambiguous, feverish production. But the thought of her buying it at a bookseller's amused him. "I smile in glorious security," he wrote,—"having a whole bale of sheets at the house-top. He never knew my

name even and I withdrew them after a little while." [1] The outcome of it all was that Miss Barrett had to content herself with a promise that she should see the work some day.

"Pauline" in fact was so thoroughly forgotten that for two decades it was hardly mentioned by any one in connection with Browning's name. Some twenty years after its publication Dante Gabriel Rossetti, then a young poet and painter, came across a copy of it in the library of the British Museum. He was profoundly struck by it. Furthermore, so confident was he that no one but the author of "Paracelsus" could have been its author that he wrote to ask Browning, who was then in Florence, if this were not the case. In his letter he stated that as the poem was not otherwise procurable he had copied the whole of it with his own hand. Browning returned an affirmative answer. This seems to have been the first discovery of the book and the poet's first acknowledgment of its authorship to any outside of his immediate circle. It was not included among his collected works until the edition of 1868. In a brief preface to it then he declared

[1] "Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett," New York, 1899, vol. I, pp. 386, 390, 400.

that he retained it with extreme repugnance. It was nothing, he said, but a matter of necessity that led him to reprint it. He knew that copies of it were in existence; that sooner or later it was the intention to have it republished. So he sought to forestall any action of the sort by correcting some misprints—not a single syllable had been changed, he asserted—and by introducing it with an exculpatory word. "The thing," he wrote, "was my earliest attempt at 'poetry, always dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine,' which I have since written according to a scheme less extravagant and scale less impracticable than were ventured upon in this crude preliminary sketch." This accords with the inscription written as early as 1838 in the volume which has been already noted as commanding the price of over seven hundred dollars.

Before taking into consideration his next work, it is desirable to give a brief outline of Browning's personal history up to the time of his first anonymous publication. His education, outside of the private instruction he received and of the attendance upon certain schools in the vicinity, was limited to a short course of study at University

College, in Gower Street. His name appears on the registrar's books for the opening session of 1829–30. But he did not remain long. Italy, he was wont to say, was his university. It was certainly one of the best schools in which to pursue later study. It is more than doubtful if it was an advantageous one for a beginner possessed of his mental characteristics. There are many other kinds of education besides that furnished by the university, and some for some persons far better. For Browning I doubt if any would have been as good, and his failure to receive it will, it is to be feared, have in the long run a damaging effect upon his reputation. His writings show throughout the lack of that final result of thorough training, the ability of the communicator of ideas to put himself in the position of the recipient.

This was clearly a defect that belonged to Browning by nature. In consequence it never could have been fully supplied. Still some of its worst results could and would have been largely corrected by severe intellectual drill. That would never have added to his greatness as a poet in those bursts of inspiration in which the poet is at his highest. It would never have given

strength to his pinions for a loftier flight. But no writer, however eminent, lives constantly, or even for any length of time, in a state of exaltation. Upon those lower levels on which the mind habitually moves, the rigid intellectual training of the university would have given clearness to expression, it would in particular have prevented resort to the startling abruptness of transition which causes the existence of those perplexing puzzles, those complicated knots of meaning which it is now the delight of the disciple to unravel or to fancy that he has unravelled.

In the long run these intricacies and ambiguities of expression are certain to affect Browning's reputation injuriously. Indeed, there need be no hesitation in saying that from the very outset they have so affected it. But they will affect it far more in the future. When contemporary interest has disappeared, it is the artistic perfection of a work that will recommend it to the great body of readers. What is bizarre, what is grotesque, what is unnecessarily obscure will then find few apologists and fewer admirers. In our literature there is a marked illustration of this truth in the case of Donne. He was in his time,

as Ben Jonson expressed it, the great lord of wit. So far as intellectual power is concerned, he could hardly reckon a superior among his contemporaries. He still retains a band of devoted admirers, and to me as one of the number he seems well worthy of the admiration they bestow. But he will always be caviare to the general. The crabbed diction, the rugged rhymes, the inharmonious versification, the obscure phraseology, all these frequently recurring as they do would continue to repel the multitude from attempting to crack the kernel of a nut even were it to contain meat more delicious than that which Donne's own writings afford.

Two years after came Browning's first appearance in literature under his own name. This was then and for a long time following usually regarded as his first actual appearance. It was in the summer of 1835 that his poem came out entitled "Paracelsus." The composition of it had taken up a large share of the preceding winter. To the subject he was led by his fondness for out-of-the-way learning and by his interest in mediævalism and mysticism which was, or had become a part of his nature. The life of the hero of the piece, who has been vari-

ously viewed as an adventurous quack and as a great pioneer in medical discovery, had been suggested to him by a foreign friend, Comte de Rupert-Montclar, to whom the finished work was dedicated. But on reflection the suggesttion had been withdrawn by its maker. There was no opportunity to introduce the subject of love, and upon love, the Frenchman sagely remarked, every young man has, of course, something new to say. Browning apparently had nothing new to say. But he was not deterred from the project by this fact. He decided to take the life of Paracelsus as his subject and to treat it in his own way.

The poem was finished in March, 1835. The difficulty was then to find a publisher. To Moxon all aspiring unknown poets applied, because he had written poetry himself. Accordingly, to Moxon Browning went first. That publisher declined even inspecting the manuscript. There was no money in verse, he declared, and he felt that he had done his share in bringing out unprofitable ventures of that sort. After trying one or two other firms to no effect, the poem was finally taken by Effingham Wilson, the same man who brought out Tennyson's volume

of 1830. It was clearly not sought for eagerly by him, for it was Browning's father who paid the expense of the publication. It can be added that his father never got his money back from the proceeds of the sale. This, though not in the least surprising to the students of the literary history of the period, seems to surprise some of the poet's biographers profoundly.

But though "Paracelsus" was not a work which paid the expense of publication, its appearance announced, to all who had eyes to see, the coming of a great original poet. The form into which it was cast partook of the dramatic. It was divided into acts corresponding to five successive epochs in the life of its hero. Conversation or rather discourse goes on between the few personages that appear. But in no proper sense of that word is the poem a drama, nor did Browning so intend it. He took care, indeed, to guard against any such misinterpretation of it, though some of his later disciples have either been ignorant of his caution or have chosen to ignore it. In the preface to the original edition he gave full recognition to the fact that the work did not conform to the canons of stage representation and that it had not been prepared with that object in view.

"I have endeavored," he said, "to write a poem and not a drama." It is as a poem alone therefore that it is entitled to be judged.

Whether the picture given of the character of Paracelsus be true or no does not strictly enter into the discussion of the literary merits of the work. Certain it is, however, that the portrayal has profoundly affected the opinion entertained in these latter days of the man portrayed; and if there has been a revolution of sentiment in his favor, to this one poem probably more than to any other single cause may be attributed the change, at least in the English-speaking world. It is noticeable that Browning subsequently fell into the error, pardonable, perhaps, at the time, of deriving our English word "bombast" from the name of the hero of the piece. This in full was Phillipus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim. "'Bombast,' his proper name," he wrote, "probably acquired from the characteristic phraseology of his lectures that unlucky significance which it has since retained." The student of English etymology, much hardened to derivations of this sort, scarcely needs to be told that "bombast," like the corresponding "fustian," is a word derived from late Latin

through the Old French and designates strictly a kind of coarse cotton cloth which from its use in stuffing and padding clothes came to adopt the transferred sense of swollen or inflated language.

"Paracelsus" was really the first, as it has remained, one of the finest of a long series of studies in character and sensation in which Browning was to exhibit peculiar excellence. There is not here the time nor is this the place to give a full account of the poem. A most marked attribute of it is the high intellectual character accorded to the hero, the original loftiness of his aims, his aspirations for a success too great for mortal to achieve, with his disdain of the helps by which mortals attain to whatever success they achieve, the inevitable reaction and degradation that follow failure, and the final purification that comes from trial and sorrow and suffering. Paracelsus learns after long experience the lesson that the pursuit of knowledge pure and simple, while setting little store on the element of human sympathy and love, furnishes a barren harvest even from the point of view of knowledge itself. To him, as to inferior men, as he looks back upon a career of effort which has been wasted and at-

tempts which have miscarried, comes that despondency which haunts the heart of even those seemingly the most fortunate. It is life's ever-recurring tragedy of faith that has failed, of expectation that has been disappointed, and of aspiration that has died, which finds expression in the inquiry which sooner or later every thoughtful man puts to himself as he compares what is with what was desired or hoped to be—Is this all? Is this what I have longed for, struggled for, dreamed of as worthy of being accomplished?

Such is the inquiry which Paracelsus directs to his own heart. In the moment of highest apparent success he does not hide his deep discontent with life. He had failed. He was miserable. Yet to the outside world he had at the very time reached the summit of human achievement. His name was in every one's mouth. His lectures were thronged by listening crowds who hung upon his words, treasured his sayings, worshipped his person. Even the chosen friend of his youth who had sought to dissuade him from the career he had marked out for himself, who had forewarned him of failure, is imposed upon by this universal acclaim which hails him as the miracle of men, the deliverer of the race from

the bondage of antiquated dogma and belief. Not so Paracelsus himself. He recognizes the unsubstantiality of the basis upon which his reputation rests. Not in the least blinded by the glitter of present approval, he perceives plainly that the hour of his degradation is on its way, and he confesses the moral failure which foreshadows the coming of the personal one. The general declension in the aims of Paracelsus, the substitution of inferior motives for the lofty ones by which he had originally been actuated, is typified in the beautiful lyric in the fourth act beginning with the line,

"Over the seas our galley went"

So much for the character of the work; it remains to consider its reception by the public. The present age which has been fertile in mythical stories about Browning's early career, has more than once loudly proclaimed that "Paracelsus" was received by the public unfavorably: perhaps with even less favor than was "Pauline"; that in truth it was a failure. If by failure is meant that it had no large sale, the assertion may be conceded to be perfectly true. But in such a fact there was at that time nothing excep-

tional. During the decade in which it made its appearance no poem or volume of poems possessed of distinct literary quality had a large sale. This was true even of the "Philip Van Artevelde" of Henry Taylor, which came out in May, 1834. That work, the most successful of all the works of high grade produced during the period in question, hardly more than paid the expense of its production, if, indeed, it can be said to have done as much as that. If at any time during the nineteenth century the profession of poet deserved Milton's characterization of it as "the homely slighted shepherd's trade," it was during its fourth decade.

But in every other respect, save that of sale, "Paracelsus" was the most unqualified of successes. It gave its author at once a recognized position in the world of letters. It brought him the acquaintance and regard of many men of conspicuous eminence in various fields of intellectual activity. With some it gave birth to intimate friendship. The authorship of "Pauline" was known to but few. Accordingly by most readers this second poem was believed to be his earliest work. More and more, as time went on, this continued to be the impression. By all

men possessed of keen critical discernment "Paracelsus," as the first production of a man who had not yet reached his twenty-third birthday, was looked upon as giving promise of a brilliant future. Defects it admittedly had; but in their eyes these were far more than counterbalanced by its merits. The feeling about the greatness of the work grew as time went on and men had had sufficient leisure to become fully acquainted with it. No one who makes himself familiar with much of the contemporary comment about the man and the book can hardly help discovering the steadily growing recognition of Browning's genius and the glowing anticipations that were then entertained of the loftiness of the achievements he was to accomplish. For example, two anonymous sonnets addressed "to the author of 'Paracelsus,'" which appeared in the *New Monthly Magazine* for September, 1836, give full expression to the belief in his future greatness which even at that early period many had come to cherish.

It is all the more desirable to bring out distinctly the contemporary success of "Paracelsus," in the highest sense of the word success, because Browning himself was in a measure re-

sponsible for the contrary belief. In his later years one gets the impression that he was almost as eager to underrate the good fortune of his first poems as he was to contradict the reports of the ill fortune of his plays. A disposition of this sort showed itself at a somewhat early period. Late in 1845 he wrote to the woman he was soon to wed that as compared with the brilliant success of Talfourd's "Ion," his "Paracelsus" had been a dead failure. There was no real justification for a comparison of this sort. The circumstances attending the publication of the two poems were essentially different. Talfourd's name had been long before the public. He had appeared as an author before Browning was born. He had been a frequent contributor to periodical literature, he had made for himself a reputation at the bar. His tragedy of "Ion," previously printed for private circulation, had been produced in May, 1836. Largely through the acting of Macready it had gained a success on the stage, which had aroused a corresponding curiosity among readers. The feeling was naturally reflected in the sale of the work in a published form. In this same letter Browning went on to say that until Forster's notice in *The Ex-*

aminer every journalist that thought it worth while to allude to his poem treated it with entire contempt, beginning with *The Athenæum*. Out of a long string of notices which his publisher received, each one vied with its predecessor in expressing disgust at his "rubbish," until something of a change was effected by the article in *The Examiner* just mentioned.

The ignorance, however great, of one man can not well be deemed sufficient to counterbalance the knowledge, however slight, of another man. It would therefore be presumptuous in me to call in question the accuracy of these assertions of Browning, because diligent search has not enabled me to find anywhere anything to justify them. Unquestionably the earliest notices of his poem in the leading critical authorities were wholly inadequate. The limited time they took for examination could not at best have kept them from being otherwise than unsatisfactory. "Paracelsus" was formally published on Saturday, the fifteenth of August. On that very day two reviews of it appeared—one in *The Spectator* and one in *The Atlas*. Just a week later came out the notice in *The Athenæum*. Had the writers of these articles been adequate to the task

to which they set themselves or to which they were set, they could not on the spur of the moment have produced anything worthy of consideration. Still, however futile their criticisms were, they were neither vituperative nor contemptuous. The review in *The Spectator*, which was a column long, and silly, and the review in *The Athenæum*, which was only two sentences long, but just as silly, though they were unfavorable, contained nothing abusive. In fact, all these earliest notices of the poem acknowledged the ability of the author. *The Atlas*, while deeming it unsatisfactory as a whole, declared that its writer possessed powers far above the ordinary level and eloquence of no common order. It cited passages from it solely on account of their beauty.

Even *The Athenæum*, which Browning mistakenly assumed to have been the first to review "Paracelsus," did not deny its merit. The critic conceded that there was talent in the poem, though it was dreamy and obscure—leaving us in doubt whether the critic deemed the poem dreamy and obscure or the talent. Somewhat similar observations, the result of glancing at the production and not really reading it, occur oc-

casionally even later. "There are many touches of beauty, almost Shakespearian, in the work," wrote the reviewer in *The Metropolitan Magazine* for October; "but its general tone is homely and its contents crude. It is a poem ambitiously unpopular." But while notices of this sort are found, especially before men had had time to read it and study it, there is nowhere any display of a contemptuous attitude in any organ of criticism of the highest grade, whatever there may have been elsewhere. Several of them—like *The Literary Gazette*, for instance—did not notice it at all. But Browning's assertion that the poem was laughed to scorn and was denounced as rubbish until the appearance of Forster's article receives no support from the reviews found in the then most authoritative guides of public opinion. The general attitude taken by the critics, with their hesitating and contradictory pronouncements, is more accurately set forth by Fox in his article on the poem which appeared about two months after its publication. "Their verdict," he wrote, "is already given in favor of its being a work of genius or else a worthless abortion—the world may find out which; and when the world has found it out, the critics will discover

the reasons and set them forth in learned dissertations."[1]

Further, if Forster's review established a barrier sufficient to withstand the raving, roaring tide of detraction which had set in against the poem, the inundation of disparagement could hardly have assumed an overwhelming character by the time he had erected it. "Paracelsus" appeared, as we have seen, in the middle of August, 1835. Forster's review was published in *The Examiner* for September 6. Consequently, two or three weeks at farthest is all the time that opprobrium had to exercise its devastating effect before Forster's review checked its further demonstration. This article indeed is credited by Browning himself and by his biographers with an almost astounding influence upon public opinion. It turns up with regularity in about every account of the poet's career which sets out to record the reception of this poem. "The great event in the history of 'Paracelsus,'" says Mrs. Orr, "was John Forster's article in *The Examiner*." A statement to the same effect is made in the "Personalia" of Mr. Gosse. "*The Examiner*," writes he, "contained a review of the poem at great length in which

[1] *The Monthly Repository*, November, 1835.

full justice was done to Mr. Browning's genius." "*The Examiner*," says Mr. Sharp, "acknowledged it to be a work of unequivocal power and predicted for its author a brilliant career."

Undoubtedly Forster's article up to the date of its appearance was far the most outspoken in the praise which it gave. It must have been all the more grateful to the author, because at that time neither he nor his critic had any knowledge of each other. It was not, indeed, till late in the following December that they met. But the review itself never had the influence which Browning's friendship for its writer attributed to it, and which later his biographers have conceded to it on his authority. It was merely one of several agencies—the greatest of which was time—that were working in favor of the production. The article in question took up three columns of *The Examiner*. Much of it consisted of extracts from the poem itself, amounting in all to about one hundred and sixty lines. Nor was it unmixed laudation. It conceded that some of the passages were tedious and some were obscure. But upon the work as a whole it bestowed the highest praise. "Since the publication of 'Philip Van Artevelde,'" began the

review, "we have met with no such evidence of poetical genius and of general intellectual power as are contained in this volume." The tone of what followed coincided with the opening. "It is some time since we read a work of more unequivocal power than this," were the words of its closing passage. "We conclude that its author is a young man, as we do not recollect his having published before. If so, we may safely predict for him a brilliant career, if he continues true to the present promise of his genius. He possesses all the elements of a fine poet."

This is cordial and, what is better, well-deserved praise. But to one familiar with the critical literature of all time, and in particular the critical literature of that time, it is far from being unexampled. Essentially the same words were then used in influential journals of works of which now the literary antiquary alone knows. But Forster's convictions, like those of many others, were fortified by further familiarity with the poem; and it is not unreasonable to suppose that the article of the critic which Browning came later to have in mind was not the one which appeared in *The Examiner*, but the long one of twenty pages which about eight months after-

ward came out in Colburn's *New Monthly Magazine*.[1] It was professedly the first number—to which no second ever succeeded—of an article entitled "Evidences of a New Genius for Dramatic Poetry." The evidence of this genius, it asserted, was the little and scantily noticed volume of "Paracelsus." The authorship of the review was not given, but was probably well known. There was no uncertainty in the utterance. "Without the slightest hesitation," wrote Forster, "we name Mr. Robert Browning at once with Shelley, Coleridge, Wordsworth. He has entitled himself to a place among the acknowledged poets of the age."

The criticism was certainly as cordial as it was true. But long before this article appeared, heartiest eulogiums had been passed upon the work. Fox, to whom it had been shown in manuscript, was not behindhand in acknowledgment both of its promise and performance. In *The Monthly Repository* of November, 1835, he gave the fullest expression to his admiration. His testimony, sincere as it evidently was, may be thought to have been influenced by a desire to stand up for one of his own contributors; for

[1] For March, 1836, vol. XXXVI, p. 288.

during that year and the preceding, Browning had published in this periodical several pieces of poetry. But no bias from this source can be thought to have influenced Leigh Hunt, who in this same month of November gave up nine columns of his *Journal* to a review of the poem, supplemented by copious extracts.

There can be no question that this article was the work of the editor himself. "Paracelsus" was highly praised in it, and, what is better, was sensibly praised. Furthermore, the review, friendly as it assuredly was, is particularly worthy of attention for the note of warning it contained as to the danger the author was exposed to of allowing his peculiarities of style to degenerate into a slovenly mannerism. Two sentences of it, it may be well to quote, not merely for the general truth they convey, but for the value of their special application. "We do not object," wrote Hunt, "to his long and often somewhat intricately involved sentences, or to forms of phraseology and construction of occasional occurrence, which are apt for the moment to perplex and startle at the first reading; or to any other deviations of a similar kind from ordinary usage or the beaten highway presented by our books of author-

ity on grammar, rhetoric or prosody, in so far as such unusual forms are the natural and unaffected product of the writer's genius working its purposes in its own way. Such distinctive characteristics, when we have become familiar with them, and they have lost any slight repulsiveness with which they may at first have acted upon us, even acquire a power of enhancing the pleasure we receive from a composition otherwise eminently beautiful, and of riveting our love for it." What Hunt deprecated was the indulgence in these peculiarities of expression when there was nothing to justify them. These words, it seems to me, set forth adequately the varying effects of Browning's poetry. When his genius is at its loftiest, the peculiarities of expression enhance the attractiveness of the composition and give it increased hold upon our feelings. But there was always the tendency to resort to these peculiarities when there was nothing in the matter to sustain their weight. Consequently, when they were not a positive excellence, they tended to degenerate into a mere trick of expression; and trickery in poetry—I do not use trickery in a bad sense—carries with it in the end its own death-warrant.

"Paracelsus" was not indeed a work to take the public by storm. For its appreciation it required close reading and reflection. It would have been no wonder, therefore, if the weekly purveyors of hasty criticism had sniffed at it hesitatingly or sneered at it contemptuously, though with opinions of this latter sort it has not been my fortune to meet. Most frequently, so far as I have observed, they took the safe course of noticing it in that perfunctory way which is adopted by the writer who seeks not so much to conceal his opinions as to conceal the fact that he has no opinions. But the more fully men consider all great work the more fully does its greatness grow upon them. It was so in the case of "Paracelsus." As time went on, the notices the poem received prove conclusively the increasing hold it was gaining over the most thoughtful class of readers. No adventitious helping hand brought this about; it was its own inherent worth. I have already asserted that Forster's criticism never had the influence upon public opinion which Browning's friendship for the critic led him to attribute to it. In the very month of March in which his second and really enthusiastic article appeared in the *New Monthly Maga-*

zine, and consequently not affected by it, came out a long, elaborate, and cordial review of "Paracelsus" in the then far more influential *Fraser's Magazine*, under the title of "Asinarii Scenici" [1] The poem was not only praised in the highest terms, but its superiority to Taylor's "Philip Van Artevelde" was distinctly and even somewhat aggressively proclaimed; and "Philip Van Artevelde" was the one work of that decade which in general critical estimate had attained highest repute.

I am not picturing the success of "Paracelsus" as being in the slightest degree overwhelming; but so far as it went the success was unequivocal. To this there is further evidence which can hardly be gainsaid. In 1842 Richard Hengist Horne contributed to a quarterly periodical an article on Browning's poetry. [2] Its value as a truthful record of the reception accorded to this particular production is founded on the fact that the review was submitted in manuscript to the poet himself. Naturally, Horne, like most men of that time, looked upon "Paracelsus" as

[1] Vol. XIII, p. 362.

[2] *Church of England Quarterly Review*, October, 1842, vol. XII, p. 464.

his earliest work. He discoursed upon the success which had attended this supposedly first venture. The restrained way in which he expresses himself is evidence that he had no disposition to exaggerate or lessen the nature or degree of the welcome which had waited upon the young poet. "His reception," wrote Horne, "was comparatively good; we may say very good. Several of those periodicals, in which the critics seem disposed to regard poetry of a superior kind as a thing to be respected and studied, hailed the appearance of Mr. Robert Browning with all the honors which can reasonably be expected to be awarded to a new-comer, who is moreover alive. In more than one quarter the young poet was fairly crowned. The less intelligent class of critics spoke of him with praise; guarding their expressions with an eye to retreat, if necessary, at any future time, made various extracts, and set him to grow."

The passages just cited from a notice which had passed before its publication under the eye of Browning himself give a view of the reception of his work a good deal different from that for which in certain instances the poet was later responsible. There can be no question as to its

correctness. No volume of verse—not even excepting "Philip Van Artevelde"—was published during the fourth decade of the nineteenth century which created a profounder impression than did "Paracelsus" upon that body of men who are indeed limited in number, but whose verdict is the verdict which posterity never undertakes to set aside. It led no slight proportion of the choicest spirits of the time to display at even this early period in his career warmest recognition of what he had already accomplished and to look with hope and expectation upon what was reserved for him to achieve in the future. It is all-important to bring out this fact sharply, because it serves to explain the disappointment with which high-wrought anticipation came to regard the works of his which immediately succeeded, the retrogression that took place in the estimate which had begun to be entertained of him by the public, and the long period of neglect that was to follow.

II

"STRAFFORD" AND "SORDELLO"

Among the men who had been attracted to Browning by his "Paracelsus" was the famous actor Macready. He was introduced to its author at the house of Fox, late in November, 1835. Under date of December 7, he records in his diary that he had read this work. He was profoundly impressed by it. There were occasional obscurities, he conceded; but these were more than atoned for by the poetry of thought, feeling, and diction which pervaded it. "The writer," he added, "can scarcely fail to be a leading spirit of his time." Subsequent perusal strengthened the first conviction. It "raises my wonder the more I read it," he remarked in an entry of several months later.

The acquaintance thus begun soon ripened into close friendship. From this time on, up to the estrangement which in 1843 attended the production of "A Blot i' the 'Scutcheon," a good deal of our knowledge of Browning's doings

come from the references to him in the actor's diary. The intimacy that sprang up directed to the drama the attention of the young poet. Under date of February 16, 1836, Macready records that he was visited by Browning in company with Forster. They had come to talk with him over the plot of a play which the former had in mind. The poet told the actor that he had been *bit* by his performance of Othello, and the actor told the poet that he hoped that blood would come. The subject Browning was then contemplating was Narses, the famous general of Justinian. But this he gave up. On August 3, of this same year, Macready tells us that Forster had informed him that Browning had settled upon Strafford. The subject chosen pleased him. "He could not have hit upon one," he wrote in his diary, "that I could more readily have concurred in."

It is altogether probable—in fact, it may be said to be certain—that Browning's choice of this subject was suggested by the aid he had been led to give to his friend Forster in his life of Strafford. At that time a series of independent works were coming out under the general title of "The Cabinet Cyclopædia." For this series

Forster had agreed to write biographies of several of the statesmen connected with the great Puritan revolution of the seventeenth century. He had already completed the life of Sir John Eliot which made up the first part of one of the contemplated volumes. In it he had again shown his zeal for his friend. In the text he quoted three or four lines of verse. They were taken, he said, from "the poet whose genius has just risen amongst us." Then a note was appended clearly for the purpose of celebrating the writer of the extract. After giving the name of the author of "Paracelsus" as the poet alluded to, he went on to say that "there would be little danger in predicting that this writer will soon be acknowledged as a first-rate poet. He has already proved himself one." [1]

The life of Eliot with that of Strafford was to constitute a single volume. For this second biography Forster had already made a collection of materials and had begun its composition. Then he fell ill. The book had been promised for a certain date; to finish it at the time specified was impracticable. Naturally Forster was in a despondent state of mind. In this condition

[1] "Eminent British Statesmen," vol. II, p. 104, London, 1836.

Browning found him. He came at once to the rescue of his friend and volunteered to do the work. The offer was accepted. Browning accordingly took the materials which Forster had gathered together and proceeded to complete the life. In 1836 the volume containing the two biographies appeared, but with no hint that any one save he whose name was on the title-page had anything whatever to do with the production of the second one.

The secret of Browning's share in the preparation of the biography was not revealed until some years after its supposedly sole author was dead. The Browning Society came upon it in the course of their probings into all the mysteries connected with the poet's career. In 1892 it brought out that part of the volume which contained the life of Strafford as being mainly the composition of the poet. The facts which have just been given have been largely taken from the preface to this reprint. These have been questioned by some; by others they have been strenuously denied. Precisely how much of the composition of the work was Browning's own may never be exactly ascertained. But that he had nothing to do with it requires ignorance to assert

or to accept. Internal evidence is sufficient of itself to make clear his participation in the undertaking. But with this we do not have to content ourselves. Those who deny the poet any share in the production must be prepared to attack his veracity. Clearly it was a belief of his own that he had a good deal to do with it. Such was the impression he conveyed to his future wife as the correspondence between them proves conclusively.[1]

Having chosen Strafford as the subject of his drama, Browning worked at it diligently. Before the close of the year 1836 he had finished it and given it to Macready. At first the actor was disposed to look with distinct favor upon the play. His own attitude of approval extended to Osbaldistone, the manager of the theater, to whom it was read on March 30, 1837. He was willing to produce it without delay. The expectations of its continuous popularity that prevailed can be inferred from the terms he offered. He agreed "to give the author £12 per night for twenty-five nights, and £10 per night for ten

[1] See in particular in the correspondence of Browning and Miss Barrett the letter of Miss Barrett dated May 26, 1846, vol. II, p. 183; of May 30, *ib.*, p. 190, and of June 6, *ib.*, p. 284.

nights beyond." So far everything was favorable. But the more Macready studied the play, the less confidence he felt in its excellence for stage representation. It became clear to him, as time went on, that nothing could save it but the acting. That this might possibly carry it to the end without disapprobation was the far from glowing anticipation of success he set down in his diary before the piece was performed. In the comments he made there upon the play he incidentally brings out with distinctness the fundamental difference between the methods adopted by Browning and the treatment of a similar subject for stage purposes by the supreme English dramatist. "In all the historical plays of Shakespeare," he observes, "the great poet has only introduced such events as act on the individuals concerned, and of which they are themselves a part; the persons are all in direct relation to each other, and the facts are present to the audience. But in Browning's play we have a long scene of passion—upon what? A plan destroyed, by whom or for what we know not, and a parliament dissolved, which merely seems to inconvenience Strafford in his arrangements." [1]

[1] Diary, April 28, 1837.

Macready's fears were realized. Only the acting could save it, he thought, and the acting did not save it. The characters of Strafford and Lady Carlisle were taken respectively by him and Helen Faucit. The combination of these two, it might seem, would suffice to score a triumph for almost any play. Without their support "Strafford" would assuredly have been the completest of failures. But even with their support it was far from being a success. It was chosen by Macready for his benefit, and naturally there was that night a full house. He seems to have made the most that could be made of his part. Browning himself was more than satisfied. He assured the actor after the rehearsal that it was to him "a full recompense for having written the play, inasmuch as he had seen his utmost hopes of character perfectly embodied." [1]

It was well that the poet had this feeling; for it was the principal recompense he received. The twenty-five nights of performances, for which the manager had agreed to pay twelve pounds each, dwindled to a mere fraction of the hoped-for number. At the end of the fifth performance the play was withdrawn. The osten-

[1] Macready's Diary, May 1, 1837.

sible reason given was the secession of Vandenhoff who took the part of Pym. Manifestly this was but a pretext. It is idle to maintain that the withdrawal of a single minor actor, however important, could have led to the removal from the boards of a play, for the continuance of which there was a demand on the part of the public; especially as another stood ready at the time to take his place.

The little success of the piece Browning at a later period ascribed to the poor performance of the minor actors. On this point there was the usual diversity of views expressed at the time. It is clear that for these subordinates—most of whom held respectable, even if not high position, on the stage—the play had not the slightest interest. It could hardly be expected therefore that they could make it interesting to others. The view taken of them by Browning does not seem to be different from that of several contemporary critics who, while praising unreservedly Macready and Helen Faucit, speak of the performance of some of the other actors as wretched, where it was not abominable. Forster especially raged furiously in *The Examiner*.[1]

[1] No. 1527, p. 294, May 7, 1837.

"Mr. Vandenhoff," he wrote, "was particularly nauseous with his whining, drawling, and slouching in Pym; and Mr. Webster whimpered in somewhat too juvenile a fashion through Young Vane. Some one should have stepped out from the pit and thrust Mr. Dale from the stage." This last-named actor was the one who took the part of the king. There is assuredly no question that drastic treatment of the kind recommended in his case would have added to the interest of the particular performance, whatever might have been its effect upon the permanent fortunes of the play.

Forster was indeed the one leading critic who remained faithful to this drama while it was alive and praised it after it was dead. "Strafford" he said in *The Examiner* of the week following, "was winning its way into greater success than we had hoped for it, but Mr. Vandenhoff's secession from the stage has caused its temporary withdrawal. It will be only temporary, we trust; no less in justice to the great genius of the author than to the fervid applause with which its last performance was received by an admirably filled house." His opinion of the favor it had won could hardly have been that of those who, out-

side of the author, were most interested in its success. Macready's view of the situation we have no means of knowing definitely; for beyond the record of its initial performance, no later reference to the play, no criticism of it, has been permitted to appear in his diary as published. But his real opinion of it can be inferred from his action. He made no attempt to revive it that season, as Forster had hoped, though his then intimate friendship with the author would have led him to take such a course, had he shared in the sentiments of the critic about its prospects of success. The temporary withdrawal of "Strafford" became, indeed, eternal. During his many years of acting that followed, Macready never brought it again upon the stage.

All contemporary accounts are practically unanimous in the view that "Strafford" was a failure. Even Forster, who put the best possible face upon the matter, conceded that it would not take permanent hold upon the stage. It is idle to pretend that this agreement of opinion was due to any hostility on the part of the critics. So little was there of this feeling that almost everywhere a genuine desire existed that the play should succeed. There is in truth a tone of re-

gretful disappointment in several of the notices which it received. The critics came prepared to praise; they wanted to praise; nothing but their greater or less conscientiousness stood in the way of their praising. This desire of seeing the tragedy successful was mainly due to the steadily growing partiality in Browning's favor which had been produced by "Paracelsus" upon the more cultivated class of minds. No one can read many of the contemporary notices of the performance of "Strafford" without becoming aware of how high was the anticipation of it raised by the previous work, and how keen was the disappointment that its author had in this later one failed to come up to the expectation entertained. The conviction, however, was general that instead of showing an advance in achievement it indicated decided retrogression.

There is an account of the performance of the opening night in the autobiography of the contemporary artist and poet, William Bell Scott. It occurs incidentally in his mention of Leigh Hunt. "On the first interview, I think, it was," he wrote, "he told me of Browning's play of 'Strafford' being placed on the stage. This was on the first of May, 1837. My admiration for

'Paracelsus' was so great I determined to go and applaud without rhyme or reason; and so I did, in front of the pit. From the first scene it became plain that applause was not the order. The speakers had every one of them orations to deliver, and no action of any kind to perform. The scene changed, another door opened, and another half-dozen gentlemen entered as long-winded as the last. Still, I kept applauding with some few others, till the howling was too overpowering and the disturbance so considerable that for a few minutes I lost my hat. The truth was that the talk was too much the same and too much in quantity; it was no use continuing to hope something would turn up to surprise the house." [1]

Apparently this is an exaggerated account of the ill success which attended the performance of the play on the opening night. But the motives given by the writer for going is another of the many proofs of the high position which his previous work had already given Browning. It shows, too, how much that poem had done and was doing for his reputation that the play of "Strafford" was published before it was performed

[1] William Bell Scott's "Autobiographic Notes," vol. I, p. 124.

as being "by the author of 'Paracelsus.'" It came out at the end of April. Furthermore, it was thought worthy of being made the subject of a generally favorable criticism in the Edinburgh *Review*. To us at this day the article which then appeared furnishes somewhat amusing reading, for it attributes to alterations made by Macready, and not to the poet himself, the abrupt transitions, the disjointed sentences, the conveyance of meaning by starts and jerks, which we all recognize now as peculiar characteristics of Browning's style. But the very fact that the Scottish quarterly thought it worth while to review the drama meant then a great deal more than we conceive of now. That stately periodical, though shorn of much of its influence, still retained something of the glamour of its original dignity. It occasionally took up some really or presumably inferior work for the sake of scoring it; but in the way of praise, it had too much regard for its position to take serious notice of any new writer who was not regarded as of great promise or of any work which was not in some way deemed of distinct importance. It was years after this before it condescended to review Tennyson at all. Even then the writer of

the article was cautioned against going so far as to commit the periodical by the bestowal of too much praise.

It is to be kept in mind that we have been discussing the play here not as a specimen of English literature, but as a contribution to the acting drama. Yet in the former capacity it is no more a success than it was in the latter. On the stage, Macready and Helen Faucit could not keep it from being a failure. It is equally a failure in the closet. As the men concerned in the performance of it did not find it interesting, so did not those who set out to read it. The inability has continued. The enjoyment of its perusal is confined mainly to those devotees of the poet whose cardinal principle is apparently to admire that portion of his production which the rest of the world deems unendurable. Men read it now, so far as they read it at all, from a sense of duty; they do not read it for pleasure. The main difficulty with it is its utter lack of interest. We care little for the characters in the tragedy or the fate that befalls them. Several of them are little more than lay-figures with names attached to them; and one could frequently be substituted for the other and neither hearer nor reader

would be conscious of any impropriety. Strafford's devotion to the king who deserts him excites little respect. In one of his character it lacks dignity; for it is not the attitude of a man which is portrayed, but that of a woman whose conduct is under the control of her feelings. The love part furnished by Lady Carlisle is insignificant; but insignificant as it is, it is too much. It appeals as little to the audience to whom it is revealed as it does to the one person of the drama from whom it is carefully kept; and so long as it is kept from him, it had no business to be in the play at all.

"Strafford" has, however, a certain importance in Browning's literary career, not because of the importance it has in itself, but because it marks his entrance into dramatic composition. The plays he wrote during his life were seven. From the number specified are intentionally excluded "Pippa Passes" and "In a Balcony," which are dramatic dialogues and not dramas proper. All of these seven belong to the earlier period of his career which is here under consideration; only three of them have ever been brought out upon the regular stage. Accordingly it may be well to consider at this point the poet's position as a

dramatist. For his rank in that class the most extravagant claims have been advanced, especially of late years. More than once we have been assured that he is the greatest of English dramatists since Shakespeare. However opinions may differ on that point, all will agree that there is one respect in which his fortunes bear no striking resemblance to those of the great Elizabethan. Contemporary evidence is ample to show that Shakespeare was the most popular playwright of his time. His plays held the stage then; they have continued to hold it ever since.

The modern advocates of Browning as a great dramatic poet do not venture to maintain that either of these facts is true of the plays of his that have been produced on the stage. Instead they content themselves with insisting that on their first representation they did as well as the average; that it was due to unforeseen and unexpected agencies that they did not gain at the time the full meed of popular favor; and, furthermore, the reports that they actually failed were and are malicious misstatements. They have this justification for what they say of this sort that the belief they express is based largely upon utterances of Browning himself, when in later

life a treacherous memory led him to put forth some remarkable statements about his plays, which bear but a remote resemblance to the truth. But even were we to concede the correctness of the attempts to explain the lack of success of these pieces in the past, they do not account for the fact that they do not hold the stage in the present, and that they give no sign of holding it in the future. They may be acted at intervals. Through adventitious circumstances they may occasionally perhaps meet with a sort of qualified favor. But no popular demand exists for them. When announced the interest they arouse is that of curiosity or partisanship. This is amply sufficient to explain whatever success Helen Faucit had with "Colombe's Birthday," in 1853, or Lawrence Barrett with "A Blot i' the 'Scutcheon," in the season of 1884–85.

The truth is that so far from being a great dramatist, second only to Shakespeare, Browning, in the proper sense of the word, is no dramatist at all. No great poet who has set out to write plays has failed more signally than he in mastering the technique of the art. None has shown so little comprehension of those details of expression, construction, and arrangement which unite to

make a play successful on the stage. Nor was he in the slightest degree inclined to defer to the opinions of those who knew from practical experience the methods best calculated to appeal to an audience. His dramas throughout exhibit vital defects as acting plays. They lack organic unity and order, and what we may call inevitable development. What is further unsatisfactory in them is the utter inadequacy of their portrayal of human nature, and too frequently their unfaithfulness to it. But, so far as the average theater-goer is concerned, worse than anything else, is their lack of sustained interest. Powerful passages appear in them; but no play can be kept alive merely by powerful passages. Above all, so far as regards representation, the impossibility of comprehending the conversation and consequently of following the course of what little action there is, without effort which must occasionally be almost agonizing in its intensity,—this of itself will always make them failures upon the stage.

I am doing no injustice to Browning in saying—for more than once he practically intimated it himself—that in his writing he went upon the theory that the reader has no rights which the

author is bound to respect. It was the business of the former to comprehend. No duty rested upon the latter to make himself comprehensible, at least easily comprehensible. This naturally did not lead to his ready or cordial acceptance by the public. But if such was his attitude toward the reader, who has leisure to turn back, to compare and to reflect, we can imagine what would be the result in the case of the hearer who must catch at once the meaning of what is uttered, whose attention must be so constantly directed to what is said and done at the moment that neither time nor opportunity is afforded to consider what has gone before. There is, indeed, no great play in which at the first hearing, as at the first reading, something will not be found to have escaped the attention of the most observant. There will be sentences of which he will not get the exact purport. But in the case of the genuine dramatist these occasional failures to comprehend the full meaning of particular lines do not interfere with the comprehension of the work as a whole or even of any of its details. The broad general effects will be as perceptible at the first hearing as they will be at the hundredth. That this should be so is a necessary require-

ment for success. But so little was this elementary consideration heeded by Browning, so little did he try to conform to it, that often a new sentence demanded the attention of the hearer before he had fully mastered the purport of the one it succeeded. To such an extent was this carried that one of the critics of the first performance of "Strafford," who though not favorable was by no means disposed to be censorious, discovered, as he tells us, that "the best way of obtaining an impression of what was going on was to take care not to follow the speech too closely, but to hear the opening of a sentence and supply the remainder by imagination." [1]

It is no marvel therefore that Browning's plays did not succeed. They are often hard to follow in the closet; on the stage it is impossible to follow them. The truth is that his forte did not lie at all in the drama. It is in dramatic monologue alone that he achieved success. In that he has no superior in our literature; we may almost say he has no equal. But the dramatic monologue is only allied to the drama; it is not the drama itself. It is confined to the revelation exhibited in pure soliloquy, or to soliloquy broken only by

[1] *Athenæum*, May 6, 1837, p. 331.

occasional interrogation. Without speaking of any other of its various failures to meet the requirements of stage representation, it excludes action entirely. But action is a cardinal distinction of the drama proper: it is essential to its very existence. Herein Browning failed completely. The characters in his plays are as a rule so much taken up with talking about everything in general that they have hardly leisure left to do anything in particular. They discuss their feelings instead of being inspired by them; and in discussing them they forget the hearer who is waiting for something to happen. The born dramatist, like the orator, has his eye always upon the audience. This was the particular class of persons from whom Browning kept his eyes steadily averted. His plays therefore are to be read and studied; they are not to be witnessed. Not one of them complies with the canons of effective stage representation. In order to rank him in this class of writers, his partisans have to invent a distinction between dramatic authors and playwrights which seems based upon the theory that a genuine dramatic author can not produce a play which an ordinary audience can endure.

But the belief that Browning is a great dramatist, that it is a distinct mark of highest cultivation to enjoy the performance of his plays has now become with many a faith which must be lived for, and if necessary be died for. The intensity of this feeling can be gaged by the fact that it sometimes survives the actual experience of seeing them acted. It is the proud boast of his extremest partisans that his dramatic writings do not appeal to the multitude. Hence, there is little opportunity for even the elect to witness their representation save by being permitted to share in the intellectual feasts of this sort which are occasionally provided in the private retreats of his special admirers. At times in our lives most of us are called upon to participate in gatherings of various kinds whose professed aim is to improve the individual and to elevate humanity as a whole. Very rarely do such gatherings conduce to hilarity. But among the countless entertainments of this sort which are apparently devised to impart additional gloom to life, there seems to me nothing quite so depressing as the performance of a Browning play by amateurs. Actor and auditor alike come to the sacrifice weighed down with a sense of re-

sponsibility for the success of this mission of doing and suffering. Especially on the faces of the hearers assembled can be seen that look of mingled resolution and resignation which almost defiantly proclaims the fixed determination, come what may, to be uplifted and inspired. True it is, frivolous and light-minded persons may be found who attend merely to see and to be seen. But the frivolity and gayety of these intruders make no head-way against the all-pervading seriousness of those who have assembled to bear aloft the gonfalon of culture pure and undefiled. The most scoffing spectator comes soon to feel that he is assisting at a solemn rite, in which the hierophants interpret to the worshippers the message to his generation—to use the now conventional phrase—which Browning has delivered. It is fair to say, however, that the ceremonial, dispiriting as it may be, is attended with none of the repulsive features which are apt to characterize all other forms of human sacrifice; for the victims not only welcome their martyrdom but are transported with the joy of being immolated. The chastened but exalted mood in which they receive the message may perhaps be best indicated in the words of a fem-

inine enthusiast, who, in a burst of confidence after one of these trying ordeals, said to me as a supposed devotee, "If we did not know how splendid this whole thing is, what a horrible bore we should think it to be."

To mark distinctly the contrast between a great poet and a great poet who is also a great playwright, nothing can be supplied more convincing than a comparison of "Luria" with "Othello" Nothing more clearly reveals the limitations of the modern author and his lack of insight into the nature of successful stage representation. In writing this tragedy, Browning had before his eyes the corresponding work of Shakespeare. His Luria, as he phrased it himself, belongs to Othello's country. The leading characters of both plays are Moors—Moors, too, of highest intellectual and moral endowment, simple-hearted, unskilled in craft, doing everything in honor. Both, too, are in the service of Italian states. Both finally commit suicide. There the resemblance ceases between the plays. In the one action hurries on from beginning to end; in the other action stands still while declamation rages unchecked. Out of several characteristics of "Luria," one may be worth pointing out because

it vitally concerns the interest of the play for representation before an English audience. Hardly a personage in it contents himself with making a serious speech of less than a dozen lines, while most of them need three or four times that number to express themselves satisfactorily. The play accordingly is not made up of dialogues but of a succession of monologues.

The lack of the instinct for dramatic propriety reaches, however, far deeper than neglect of characteristics which go to render a play successful upon the stage. Othello is acted upon by influences we all recognize; he exhibits feelings with which we all sympathize, and the deed which ends his life is to us a natural solution of the difficulties into which he has been betrayed. In Browning's play it requires protracted thought to perceive any reason for the behavior of the characters; and Luria himself finally commits suicide without other justification for so doing save that he, while acting with perfect loyalty, is distrusted by the city which employs him. Browning's future wife, whose critical acumen was as much superior to her husband's as her creative power was inferior, naturally objected to this way of disposing of the protagonist of his

drama. It struck her as ignoble and unheroical. It is curious to read Browning's own explanation of the reasons that led him to resort to the cheap expedient of suicide—a device, it may be added, to which he was always too much addicted for getting rid of his characters. It was a very just objection which Macready made to the ending of "A Blot i' the 'Scutcheon." "Observe only," the poet wrote, "that Luria would stand, if I have plied him effectually with adverse influences, in such a position as to render any other end impossible without hurt to Florence, which his religion is to avoid inflicting—passively awaiting, for instance, the sentence and punishment to come at night, would as surely inflict it as taking part with her foes. His aim is to prevent the harm she will do herself by striking him, so he moves aside from the blow."

Contrast Luria's motives for the final act as set forth by Browning with those indicated by the great dramatist for a similar ending. In the case of Othello, there is scarcely anything else left for him to do. His life has centred itself in his love for Desdemona. The belief in her revolt, which his simple nature has been worked upon to accept, causes him to care no more for

what has been to him life's supremest joy. The supposed knowledge of her unfaithfulness leads him to destroy the one being whom he finds out too late to have been his own in thought and heart and deed. When he comes to learn the real truth, it is not loss of honor which afflicts him; it is not the attitude of Venice toward himself that disturbs him. It is that through his own credulous and unreasoning suspicion everything has gone which for him has made life worth living. To take himself out of it seems the natural and only solution of the difficulties with which he finds himself environed, the only mode of relief from the agony he endures, the only possible expiation he can make for the crime he has committed. We are therefore not astounded by his act because daily we see similar conditions followed by the same result.

But in the case of Luria, the reason given for suicide is more than inadequate; it is almost entitled to be termed ridiculous. Why does he destroy himself? He has served the state with absolute fidelity. Though watched by its jealous spies, he has resisted all inducements to avenge himself for the imputations cast upon his loyalty and honor. Yet his devotion can not

ward off the desire to strike him, if it can ward off the attempt itself. So, as Browning expresses it, he moves aside from the blow. The moving aside from it is a delicate way of saying that he proceeds to take poison. Paying no heed to every other consideration of the merits or defects of this tragedy, its unfitness for stage representation is evidenced by the method taken to conclude it. To expect a miscellaneous audience to sympathize with a piece of overstrained sentiment like this—a great and victorious general, with an army devoted to him personally, led to destroy himself on the very eve of his final triumph, in consequence of his feelings having been hurt on learning that the city to whose interests he has been uniformly loyal, has come to distrust him and is planning to destroy him—to expect sympathy with a course of conduct which is even more unnatural, if possible, than it is irrational, could never enter the mind of a dramatist who sought to portray life as it is and men as they are.

The most damaging thing that could be said against "Strafford" was that it indicated a lack of that dramatic skill which enables a writer to construct a successful acting play. But one can

be a great poet without being a great dramatic poet. Browning's next venture was in his favorite analysis of character. It was a production which he had long been contemplating, and upon which, with frequent interruptions, he had long been working. It is sometimes stated—I know not on what authority—that it was begun in 1838. Yet unless I am grossly mistaken, "Sordello" is the work to which he alludes in the preface to the original edition of "Paracelsus." Be that as it may, we know that it was advertised on one of the leaves of the published play of "Strafford" as then nearly ready. We know further from the diary of Harriet Martineau that on December 23, 1837, Browning told her that the poem in question would soon be done;[1] and that on April 11 of the year following, he called upon her just before leaving for Venice whither he was going in order to get a view of the localities mentioned in it.[2]

However uncertain the time of composition, there is not as much vagueness in our knowledge of that, as there is in our knowledge of the

[1] "Memorials of Harriet Martineau," by Maria Weston Chapman, in Autobiography of, Boston, 1877, vol. II, p. 325.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 337.

hero of the poem. Here it suffices to say that he was a troubadour of the thirteenth century, the mention of whom by Dante, in the "Purgatorio" has assured him of a wider recognition than has been gained for him by the little which has been preserved of his own writings. So far, in truth, as the value of Browning's production is concerned, the Sordello of history may be dismissed from consideration. The actual fortunes of the hero were of the slightest account in the scope of the work. This is true also of the various other characters introduced into it. They serve little other purpose than to give an air of actuality to the events described as taking place. But the poem itself, Browning emphatically declared, was nothing more than a study in the development of a soul. Accordingly it was from this point of view alone that he wished it to be judged.

"Strafford" had been a disappointment. The faults of "Paracelsus" had been there exhibited in an aggravated form, while the beauties of that work were conspicuously absent. But the descent in popular estimate due to the play was nothing compared to that caused by the poem which followed it. Perhaps there is no in-

stance in literary history of an author who proceeded to destroy his own reputation with more systematic endeavor than did Browning in the composition of "Sordello." Certainly never were efforts of that sort attended with more overwhelming success. Nothing was neglected. "Paracelsus" had at times presented difficulties to the most thoughtful reader. But to thoughtful and thoughtless alike "Sordello" presented nothing else. Both to those who gave themselves up to its careful or careless perusal, it was very much in the situation of the earth as recorded in the story of the creation. It was without form and void and darkness was on the face of the deep. Had the earth been left in that state, it would have been found uninhabitable. "Sordello" was left in that state, and it was found unreadable.

We are now frequently assured that Browning is not really obscure at all. The fault is not with him, but with us. The idea that such a charge can be made against "Sordello" in particular, we are led by one of the poet's biographers to believe, indicates a mental obliquity so dense that it amounts almost to moral perversity. It is in the following glowing terms that the late Mr.

William Sharp, in his life of the poet, expressed his indignation at any assertion of the sort. "Surely," he exclaimed, "this question of Browning's obscurity was expelled to the limbo of dead stupidities when Mr. Swinburne, in periods as resplendent as the whirling wheels of Phœbus Apollo's chariot, wrote his famous incidental passage on Chapman."

To him who has full faith in the view propounded by the biographer, it is somewhat depressing to find him a little later in the same volume inferentially relegating to a habitation in this limbo of dead stupidities the opinions of Douglas Jerrold, Tennyson, and the Carlyles. He tells us that they actually professed themselves unable to understand. From his later utterances it is plain that Carlyle indeed fully sympathized with his wife, who said that she had read the poem through without being able to make out whether Sordello was a man, a city, or a book. The story of Jerrold is too well known to bear recounting in full, and I refer to it in passing mainly because of the attitude toward it of Browning himself. Given "Sordello" to read while recovering from a severe illness, Jerrold after wrestling with it for a while sank back in de-

spair in his bed with the exclamation, "O God, I am an idiot!" The poet used to enjoy narrating this incident, though naturally he took the ground that there was no justification for the feeling. Yet it must fairly be conceded that none of the persons just mentioned can be deemed much inferior to the average extoller of Browning's clearness; collectively they might even be considered equal to the Swinburne-Sharp combination of intellectual astuteness and resplendent rhetoric.

This contemporary inability to understand and appreciate "Sordello" has been explained by some Browning enthusiasts as due to the fact that the public of the time in which it appeared was not intellectually athletic enough to grapple with its difficulties. To overcome these was needed the virile mental vigor of our own more robust generation. Accordingly we can look down with complacency as well as compassion upon the failure to comprehend of still others of those frailer spirits of the past who retired baffled before what is to us so easy. One of these gentle souls was Harriet Martineau. She had been captivated by "Paracelsus." In her autobiography she tells us that the poem having been lent her, she, for the first time in her life, passed a

night without sleeping a wink in consequence of reading a portion of it before going to bed. But "Sordello" she found not conducive to wakefulness. The attempted reading of it had made Jerrold fear for his sanity; it made her fear for her health. "I was so wholly unable to understand it," she writes, "that I supposed myself ill." Had she been really taken ill, it would have appeared a just punishment for the advice she had given the poet in this interview of the 23d of December, 1837, already mentioned. He told her then that not only "Sordello" would soon be done, but that he had come to the conclusion to deny himself preface and notes, as he must choose between being historian or poet, and therefore could not split the interest. She confirmed him in this attitude. "I advised him," she said, "to let the poem tell its own tale." Accordingly, it was sent forth in its native obscurity. Rather than not split the interest, no interest was left to split.

Charles Kingsley must also be included among the contemporary stupids. Half a score of years later than "Sordello," his "Alton Locke" was published. In it the hero is represented by the novelist as giving an account of the conversation he holds with the girl of higher station with whom

he is in love. "She talked," he says, "about poetry, Tennyson, and Wordsworth; asked me if I understood Browning's "Sordello"; —and she comforted me, after my stammering confession that I did not, by telling me that she was delighted to hear that; for she did not understand it either and it was pleasant to have a companion in ignorance." Even earlier than this Lowell had relegated his personal opinion to this limbo of dead stupidities. In a review of Browning's works, which was published in 1848, he gave the most cordial of recognitions to the genius of the poet—at a time, too, when such recognition was far from frequent in his own country. But while conceding the excellence of detached passages in "Sordello" he pointed out its formlessness and the inadequacy of its workmanship. "It was a fine poem," he said, "before the author wrote it." His general opinion as to its obscurity he had no hesitation in expressing. "We may as well say bluntly," he remarked, "it is totally incomprehensible as a connected whole." [1]

There is even a sadder story to be told of the impression produced by this work. Among those

[1] *North American Review* for April, 1848.

who lacked then the requisite insight now so common among the poet's devotees must be reckoned the woman who was in a short time to become his wife. She had hailed Browning before she knew him personally as the King of the Mystics. During the year before her marriage, when friendship was ripening into love, she admitted his obscurity—not, indeed, on the subject of his feelings toward herself personally, in regard to which from a very early period of their acquaintance Browning seems to have exhibited so little of his usual obscurity that he fairly terrified her at first by his clearness. Miss Barrett at that time confessed to a correspondent that she herself was guilty of the sin of Sphinxine literature, and had struggled hard to renounce it. "Do you know," she added plaintively, "I have been told that *I* have written things harder to interpret than Browning himself?—only I can not, can not believe it—he is so very hard." [1] To the same friend she declared that "Sordello" had many fine things, and was well worthy of study, and, indeed, very peculiarly in need of study. She would not therefore recommend its perusal,

[1] "The Letters of Elizabeth Browning," New York, 1898, vol. I, p. 254.

though she was eager to have him read "Paracelsus." "Sordello," she remarked, had been thrown down by many as unintelligible, and had been retained by herself as a specimen of the Sphinxine literature in all its power. Under the circumstances, this obtuseness may be forgiven her. Mr. Swinburne's essay on Chapman had not been written at that time, and in consequence she could not well have been expected to know better.

If these were the feelings of contemporaries who were the most eminent in the literary world, we can get some idea of the state of mind of the ordinary critic at the time the poem appeared. It is putting it mildly to say that he was dumfounded. "Sordello" came out at the very end of February. Then as now the leading periodicals which devoted themselves more or less to literary criticism were frequently, if not regularly, furnished with advance copies. Consequently it was not unusual for them to review books as soon as they were nominally published. But hardly anything of the kind took place now. The critical journals were either silent, or they waited. *The Spectator* was the only important weekly that gave immediate attention to the

work; but that it was enabled to do by its treatment of it. It went on the principle that it is not necessary to wade all through a mud-puddle to become aware that it is a mud-puddle. "What this poem may be in its extent," it observed, "we are unable to say, for we cannot read it. Whatever may be the poetical spirit of Browning, it is so overlaid in 'Sordello' by digression, affectation, obscurity, and all the faults that spring, it would seem, from crudity of plan and self-opinion, which will neither cull thoroughly nor revise composition, that the reader—at least the reader of our stamp—turns away." Two weeks later *The Atlas* paid attention to the poem. Its critic had been an ardent admirer of what was then deemed Browning's first work. But in "Sordello" he was utterly disappointed, and expressed with earnestness his disapproval. It was worse, he said, than "Strafford." That drama had shown a descent from the high promise of "Paracelsus." In this third production, however, all the faults of the first were exhibited in an intensified form, without the compensation of an equal amount of excellence in any single point of view.[2]

[2] March 28, 1840.

Neither the *Literary Gazette* nor *The Examiner* reviewed the poem at all. In the case of the latter the omission was peculiarly significant. We know from notices written by Forster of certain of Browning's later work that "Sordello" was too much for even that faithful and devoted friend. He clearly did not feel it in his power to speak well of it; therefore he chose to say nothing at all. The only review which seems to have been the result of an effort, honest whether adequate or inadequate, to penetrate into the meaning of the poem, was that which appeared in *The Athenæum*. This, however, did not come out till three months later. The criticism, though the fruit of careful study and of arduous and it might almost be said of indignant industry, was hardly more favorable than the others. It spoke in the severest terms of the mannerisms found in the poem, of its peculiarities of language, of its disregard of euphony, of its occupying the reader's attention with novelties of construction which he must master in order to grasp the meaning lost to apprehension in cloudy depths. It further censured the oracular utterances which turned out when unwrapped from their profusion of words to be nothing more than commonplace truths. I am

here stating the critic's point of view, not upholding its correctness. But whether the judgment be true or false it is worth quoting as seemingly the only contemporary notice of the work in which a serious attempt was made to study it as a whole.[1]

So much for the estimate of "Sordello" taken at the time by the leading critical authorities. Few as have been the citations given, they may be safely regarded as fairly representative of general contemporary opinion. If a favorable word can be found for the work in any quarter, even the obscurest, it seems to have escaped so far the hardest search. Certain it is that Browning did all that lay in his power to make difficult the comprehension of the poem; at least he omitted to do anything that would render its comprehension easier. All the usual, not to say necessary, helps were left unprovided. Let us consider as a single item the historical setting. The action of the poem takes place in Italy in the earlier half of the thirteenth century. In this remote period, in the history of a foreign land, the events which form the background consist of nothing more important than the petty feuds

[1] *Athenæum*, May 3, 1840.

which went on in the Italian cities between the adherents of the Pope and of the Emperor. The contests of these factions often deserve Milton's characterization of the bickerings between the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, that it was as worth while to chronicle the wars of kites and crows flocking and fighting in the air. No one but a special student of the period would or could know the details, or form any conception of the characters whose names flit to and fro across the pages of the poem.

Yet the account of the mental struggles Sordello is represented as undergoing presuppose some knowledge of the facts both of his personal career and of the events in which he took part. If this knowledge does not exist or is not furnished, the reader is confused at the very outset by the mention of names about whose owners the story gives no light, and by allusions to incidents of which he is almost inevitably in the blindest ignorance. They have not much bearing, it can justly be said, upon the development of the hero's soul. So much the more reason was there that these obstacles in the way of comprehension should have been removed. The very briefest outline of the facts referred to or mentioned, the

very briefest account of the personages and places introduced would have given the reader a vantage-ground from which to attack the other difficulties of the poem. Such a course would certainly have prevented Mrs. Carlyle from being in doubt whether Sordello was a man, a city, or a book.

But Browning was far from pandering to that depraved taste which hungered and thirsted for useful information. He disdained to impart it. The facts contained or referred to in the poem were, he said, of no importance in themselves as regards the main idea he had in mind. At any rate the reader ought to be ashamed of himself for not knowing them. Such was his attitude, not only in the case of this work, but of several which appeared subsequently. He accordingly condescended to cast no light upon "Sordello." The only assistance afforded later to its comprehension was the running title at the head of each page. These are not to be found in the original edition. They are at times so much a help that one naturally waxes indignant that a help of this sort should be needed at all; for the obscurity which envelops the work as a whole extends constantly to details. For illustration, there is in

the opening book an apostrophe to some poet, whom he asks this time to come not near and thereby scare him with his pure face. There is nothing in the text to indicate who is the person here addressed. Scores of writers might be guessed by those ignorant of Browning's special likes and dislikes; and in that condition must be assumed to have been nearly all the readers he was then likely to have. The running title now on the page following dispels the doubt. It is headed "Shelley departing, Verona appears." This enables us to see who it is that the author had in mind; but such an illegitimate way of imparting needed information is not the way for him to follow who writes to be understood.

To the very end of his days, however, Browning never swerved from the belief that he himself was not in the slightest degree responsible for the failure of this poem—for the failure of people to buy it, or of people to understand it who did buy it. In the case of any one of his works, indeed, he was inclined to be impatient with those who hinted that labor spent upon its correction might result in adding to its intelligibility. As regards "Sordello," however, once he paid heed to a suggestion of this sort. It came from the woman

who was soon to give him the promise of becoming his wife. In September, 1845, she made use of the influence she had already acquired and urged him to recast the poem. "It is," she wrote, "like a noble picture with its face to the wall just now, or at least in the shadow." It needed drawing together and fortifying in the connections and associations, "which," she added, "hang as loosely every here and there as those in a dream, and confound the reader who persists in thinking himself awake."

That Browning had determined to make a revision in consequence of the wish she expressed, the further correspondence between the two reveals. In a letter written to him the following month, Miss Barrett speaks of "the new avatar of 'Sordello' which you taught me to look for." The matter was therefore, clearly in contemplation. But the deity whose avatar she expected never became incarnate. While in Paris, in the first half of 1856, Browning did indeed make an effort to revise the poem. He spent much labor and pains, he tells us, to turn the work into what the many might like instead of what the few must like. But he gave up the attempt and left it essentially as he found it. Lines

were added, changes of expression were made, but there was nothing altered in the framework and contexture. What the poem needed in order to be rendered intelligible and interesting was not occasional revision, but a complete recast; and of an undertaking of this kind Browning had then become absolutely incapable.

In dedicating "Sordello" later to his friend Melsand, of Dijon, the poet told him that he blamed nobody for its failure, least of all himself. This last phrase is significant. It reflects his invariable mental attitude. His faults of expression, he acknowledged, were many; but people might have surmounted the difficulties caused by them, had they cared to take the pains; if they did not care enough for the book or its writer to do this, what would avail its faultlessness? Never was there a more unblushing declaration on the part of an author of his willingness to shift upon the reader the burden of clearing a path through the jungle of his expression which he himself was too indolent or too indifferent to open up. An attitude of this sort jars heavily upon the feelings of the man who regards it as the first requirement of a book to be made as readable as possible for those for whose perusal it was

designed: and that one of the first requisites for this result is that it should not need help outside of itself to be rendered intelligible. Personally, too, I confess to getting no particular enjoyment from a production which stands in need of perpetual commentary. Still tastes are different. The existence of many worthy persons must be conceded who are unable to enjoy literary food of any sort until it has gone through a preliminary process of mastication by somebody else.

It follows from what has been said that this poem is much more a revelation of Browning's soul that it is of Sordello's. It is further to be added that it fully merited the fate which it has been its lot to undergo. In one sense it is interesting as a study. It has all the worst qualities of Browning's style. Rugged versification, abrupt transition we are prepared to put up with in all his pieces. But in this poem, these peculiarities of diction are carried to the extreme. The liberty taken with expression often more than approaches lawlessness; it is lawlessness itself. As one illustration out of several, phrases and sometimes clauses are inserted into sentences, necessarily breaking the continuity of the

thought. Sparingly introduced, these, if brief, may be no blemish; sometimes they are a positive ornament. But it is an essential condition of their value that they should be introduced only sparingly. In "Sordello" they not only appear often, but sometimes in the most aggravated—and to use a modern colloquialism—in the most aggravating form. In more than one instance the intercalary sentence which occupies the middle of another consists of several lines. Necessarily, the reader fails to carry in his mind, amidst this pressure of intrusive matter, what the author has been talking about previously. Consequently, when he arrives at the jumping-off place of the remarks inserted, he has to retrace his steps and go back to where he left off in order to resume the connection of thought. This usage is bad enough in prose; in poetry it is absolutely intolerable. It could never be resorted to by the conscious literary artist.

This, however, is but a single one of the fatal defects which beset expression in "Sordello." The poem fails in a number of other and more essential things which go to constitute poetry. There it stops short. You may apply to it any other characterization you choose. You may

call it metaphysical, psychological, intellectual, problematical, profoundly thoughtful, what indeed you will. But never once does it fulfil the function for which poetry exists. It never once stirs the heart, it never once uplifts the soul. As an aid to mental discipline, as an incitement to the efforts of those who have, or fancy they have,penetrated its mystery and thereby achieved an intellectual victory against great odds, it may be regarded as fulfilling a valuable function. But by those who believe that the first business of a poem is to be poetical, it will never be regarded otherwise than as a failure. It will remain a colossal derelict upon the sea of literature, inflicting damage upon the strongest intellects that graze it even slightly, and hopelessly wrecking the frailer mental craft that come into full collision with it—at least such is the impression one gets from the essays written upon it.

I have dwelt so long upon this work because of the influence it had upon Browning's later fortunes. It was something more than failure that greeted "Sordello." It imposed a burden upon the reputation of the poet against the pressure of which it was impossible for it to bear up. The pity of it is that its ill success not merely

injured the repute of this particular production, but it placed what was soon to show itself an almost unsurmountable obstacle in the way of the beautiful works that were speedily to follow. The public mind was thenceforth prejudiced against the poet. With the appearance of "Sordello" began the eclipse of Browning's reputation which even after the lapse of more than a third of a century had not passed away. Not but that he had in the worst of times a band of devoted admirers. But the number was small, nor were those composing it influential, however able. With the general public of even the highly educated he thenceforth ceased to be a power. This indeed is much more true of England than of America. Yet even in this country, where familiarity with his writings was altogether greater than in his own, his reputation was far from proportionate to his merits. In England there was further a sort of resentful feeling as to the character of his work, as if it evinced a determined disposition not to pay any heed to the legitimate requirements of the reader. "He is further chargeable," wrote the reviewer of "Sordello" in *The Atlas*, "with betraying the disagreeable truth that the author has not only

benefited nothing from experience, but that the sins of his verse are premeditated, wilful, and incurable." These words assuredly expressed the sentiment of large numbers. Included, too, among them were many who liked Browning as a man, many who had been previously disposed to admire him as a poet. "Ephraim is joined to his idols, let him alone," represented thenceforth the general state of mind. Let alone severely he most assuredly was.

III

"BELLS AND POMEGRANATES"

"PIPPA PASSES." "A BLOT I' THE 'SCUTCHEON"

The success of "Sordello" had not been such as to encourage the production of further works. But Browning himself was not discouraged, either at the time or later. He had, as he wrote to a friend the following year, "a head full of projects—mean to song-write, play-write forthwith." Even then three works had been written or were in contemplation. He felt, indeed, his mind thronging with ideas to which he must give utterance and solicited by schemes which he must carry into effect.

But a publisher could not well be expected to furnish at his own expense literature which the public was unwilling to buy; and Browning himself could hardly procure the means to undertake any great venture at his own risk. At this

juncture Moxon made him a proposal. He was at that time bringing out editions of the Elizabethan dramatists in a cheap form, printing their works in fine but clear type, two columns to a page. If Browning was willing to publish his poems in this manner, the expense would not amount to more than twelve to sixteen pounds for each volume, issued as a pamphlet. It could in consequence be sold for a small sum, and readers might naturally be attracted by the lowness of the price. Browning accepted the proposal. Hence arose the series of volumes which appeared under the general title of "Bells and Pomegranates." These began in 1841 and ended in 1846. They contain some of the best work the poet ever produced; assuredly many of the pieces by which he is best known to the majority of readers. Yet in spite of their cheapness and excellence these volumes seem to have attained nothing like the circulation they deserved. I can not find that a second edition of any of them ever came out at the time. There is an apparent exception in the case of one of the tragedies; but it is only apparent.

The general title given to these works puzzled everybody; at least everybody who has left a re-

corded opinion. In fact, it continued to remain a mystery until the concluding number of the series. Then Browning, under what may be called domestic pressure, condescended to give an explanation of it. The reviewer in *The Athenæum* was perplexed in his notice of the first number of the series, and his words are suggestive of the reputation the poet had now acquired. "Mr. Browning's conundrums," he wrote, "begin with his very title-page. 'Bells and Pomegranates' is the general title given (it is reasonable to suppose Mr. Browning knows why, but certainly we have not yet found out—indeed 'we give it up')."[1] It proved later, indeed, too much for the comprehension of his future wife. "Do tell me," she wrote in October, 1845, "what you mean precisely by your 'Bell and Pomegranates' title. I have always understood it to refer to the Hebraic priestly garment—but Mr. Kenyon held against me the other day that your reference was different, though he had not the remotest idea how. And yesterday I forgot to ask, for not the first time. Tell me, too, why you should not in the new number satisfy by a note somewhere, the Davuses of

[1] No. 737, Dec. 11, 1841.

the world who are in the majority, with a solution of this one Sphinx riddle."[1] To this request Browning acceded, though he thought it best to put off the explanation till the closing number of the series.[2] But before that time came, he seems to have changed his mind. He was apparently disposed to let the title remain in what was to himself its self-evident clearness. At least that is the impression received from the words of the one person who would not be denied.

"I persist in thinking," wrote Miss Barrett in March, 1846,[3] "that you ought not to be too disdainful to explain your meaning in the 'Pomegranates.' Surely you might say in a word or two, that your title having been doubted about (to your surprise, you *might* say!) you refer the doubters to the Jewish priest's robe, and the Rabbinical gloss—for I suppose it is a gloss on the robe—do you not think so? Consider that Mr. Kenyon and I may fairly represent the average intelligence of your readers—and that *he* was altogether in the clouds as to your meaning—had not the most distant notion of it—while I,

[1] "The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett," vol. I, p. 248.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 249.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 570.

taking hold of the priest's garment, missed the Rabbins and the distinctive significance, as completely as he did. Now why should you be too proud to teach such persons as only desire to be taught?"

Miss Barrett's persistence at last won the day. Browning submitted, as she put it, "quite at the point of the bayonet." [1] Accordingly, when the eighth and final number of the series came out in 1846, he reluctantly and somewhat grumblingly proceeded to paint the lily by explaining still further what was in his eyes self-evident. Perhaps nothing can be found anywhere more indicative than were his words on this occasion, of his general attitude; of his absolute incapacity to comprehend that a particular train of association of ideas familiar to him, and therefore to him perfectly clear, should not be as clear to every one else. "I take the opportunity of explaining," he wrote, "in reply to inquiries, that I only meant by that title to indicate an endeavor toward something like an alternation, or mixture of music with discoursing, sound with sense, poetry with thought, which looks too ambitious

[1] "Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett," vol. II, p. 67.

thus expressed, so the symbol was preferred. It is little to the purpose that such is actually one of the most familiar of the many Rabbinical (and Patristic) acceptations of the phrase; because I confess, that letting authority alone, I supposed the bare words, in such juxtaposition, would sufficiently convey the desired meaning."

There you see it. Of course, if you had been possessed of any sense, you would have seen it before. There is something delightful in the naïve astonishment expressed that any one should have found the slightest perplexity in comprehending at once the meaning which the juxtaposition of the two main words of the title so plainly indicates. It is furthermore so common a thing with all lovers of poetry to have a wide acquaintance with rabbinical and patristic literature that this knowledge ought to have suggested the signification to him who had not the sense to guess it for himself. Browning's course has been defended on the ground that dealing from earliest years with out-of-the-way topics, they had become so familiar to him that he assumed that all persons knew them as well as he did himself. This is attributing to him much special learning, but little sense in the use of it. His acquire-

ments were certainly great. But there must always be a certain feeling of distrust of him who seems to know everything about subjects of which hardly any one else knows anything. In matters, too, where he can be followed with comparative ease, he more than once displayed misapprehension and ignorance where he assumed to have perfect knowledge. What confidence, accordingly, can we always have in the value of the treasures he brings back from his excursions into the realms of the mysterious where few can follow him, and those few rarely readers of poetry?

So much for the title; now for the works themselves. The first number of the series was "Pippa Passes." To "Paracelsus" Browning had refused to apply the term "drama"; yet by that designation he chose to denote this production. It is hard to see why he should have given to the one the name he had denied to the other. The only easily discoverable reason is that the poet was now coming to be dominated by the doctrine of the unities. He consequently called the later work a drama because the scene of it is laid in one place, and the time is limited to the daylight of one day. But while it is a poem dramatically

told, it is in no proper sense of the word what he designated it. It consists of a series of absolutely independent scenes bound together by this single slight tie, that upon the action of the various personages in them, Pippa, as she passes, produces a deep and permanent impression.

The poem was published in the first half of 1841. Both in conception and execution it is one of Browning's happiest performances. It is entirely free from certain defects which are apt to characterize his other pieces of a dramatic character. There is nowhere in it any violation of that natural probability which should govern the actions and emotions of the characters. It is an old adage that truth is stranger than fiction. We all know that it is the unexpected that frequently happens, that what in a tale would seem highly improbable occurs at times in fact. But to devices of this kind neither novelist nor playwright has a right to resort, unless in very exceptional instances. They are precisely of the nature of the *deus ex machina* to which long ago Horace justly objected. Accordingly, if indulged in at all, it should be only on very extraordinary occasions. Writers of these two classes—that is, novelists and playwrights—are bound to repre-

sent men as they appear to us acting under conditions which are normal. Even when the circumstances are exceptional, the characters are to conduct themselves as we should expect to find them behaving in real life. To resort not to the merely surprising, but to the surprising which is also unnatural and improbable, shows a deficiency in skill, if not in the highest art. It may occasionally be pardoned for the sake of the effect it produces, but it can rarely be approved.

No fault of this sort appears in "Pippa Passes," unless one were to consider such what seems to me the perfectly legitimate extension to several persons of an influence which everybody would concede might well have happened to any particular individual of them all. We know from our own observation, if not from our own experience, that a remark overheard, a chance word spoken with not the least thought on the part of the speaker of affecting the course of another, often influences profoundly the whole life of the hearer. It is too common to need more than a mere statement; yet in this work for the first time in literature, at least in English literature, has the idea been set forth in completeness. Here it is made the groundwork upon which the whole action of

the piece turns. The girl of the silk mills, ignorant of father, ignorant of mother, appears on this one day of pleasure that diversifies her year of toil as the central figure destined to influence the future of the four groups of persons whom she pictures to herself as the most happy in Asolo—rising slowly in her own conception from the rapture of guilty love, through the love of bride and groom, of mother and son, to the happiness of the love which is devoted to the service of the Maker. Impersonating all these characters in her fancy, she comes upon each of the groups at the critical moment, wakening with her song remorse for guilt, imparting nobility of resolve, strengthening high-hearted but failing resolution, and again utterly destroying the force of insidious temptation. Unconsciously to herself she has been a messenger of heaven to punish the guilty and to reward the good. As she passes, she leaves behind crime loathing its own foulness, evil devices frustrated, misfortune averted, schemes that threatened her own fate rendered abortive, by inspiring the characters either with remorse or with feelings which impart nobility to life and bring consolation to the hour of death.

The scheme of the poem as a whole is worked

out with consummate skill. It is both high morality and high art. It is free from almost everything that is objectionable in Browning's manner, though of course it is not free from his mannerisms; for if the mannerisms were lacking, the work would hardly have seemed Browning's. In it, too, appeared for the first time a specimen of that vivid and vigorous prose conversation which the poet was to exhibit on a fuller scale in "A Soul's Tragedy," the last work of the series. In "Pippa Passes" this power is little more than indicated; but in the second part of "A Soul's Tragedy" it is fully exhibited. It is there so genuine, so much more dramatic than his verse that one must always regret that Browning did not see his way to resort to it more frequently. It is especially remarkable for being so distinct from his ordinary prose, as regards clearness and naturalness and brilliancy. All these it has in a profusion which puts the poet on a level with the greatest of the Elizabethan playwrights. On the contrary, much of his ordinary prose lacks all the charm which belongs to his verse and exhibits nearly all its defects.

"Pippa Passes" has been from the beginning a favorite of readers with whom Browning him-

self is a favorite. In their early correspondence, before they had actually met, his future wife confessed to him that she could find it in her heart to covet the authorship of that poem more than of any other of his works.[1] In his reply Browning declared that he himself liked it better than anything else he had ever done.[2] There was every reason indeed to expect for it great success, at least with the most cultivated class of readers. Something of that success it doubtless did attain. But "Sordello" had now accomplished its fatal work. There is no obscurity in "Pippa Passes" which should deter from its full comprehension any reasonable and reasoning creature. Those peculiarities of expression which in previous works had offended so many were here, but they were few. What mannerisms were exhibited, were exhibited usually in a form to which there could be no objection even if they did not add attractiveness to expression. Furthermore, the production contained ideas of deepest significance, couched in poetry of the highest order. But with the exception of *The*

[1] "Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett," vol. I, p. 22.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

Examiner the work met a somewhat cool reception from the leading critical organs of that day.

This review in *The Examiner*—which is found in the number for October 2, 1841—is noticeable, because it is evident from it that Browning's faithful partisan, Forster, had been sorely tried by the production of "Sordello." It is interesting to read his words for the effort he made to put a good face upon what in his inmost heart he felt to be a failure. "'Paracelsus,'" he wrote, "announced a new and original poet—one of the rarest things met with in these days; much cried out for, much sought after, and when found much objected to. We dare say 'Paracelsus' did not succeed; we never heard of a second edition." Then he went on to express himself in regard to the huge obstruction which the poet had raised in the way of his own fame, and the oblivion which in the space of less than two years had overtaken the work upon which he had staked his hopes of renown. "Mr. Browning," he continued, "has published since then; in our opinion not so well. But yet not so as to falsify any anticipation formed of the character of his genius. To write a bad poem is one thing; to write a poem on a bad system is another and

very different. When a greater curiosity about the writer shall hereafter disentomb 'Sordello,' it will not be admired for its faults, but in spite of them its power and its beauty will be perceived."

Forster warmly praised "Pippa Passes"; but his is the only unmixed tribute of admiration which can be found in the leading weekly dispensers to the public of ready-made literary judgments. The poem must have been published in April, for *The Spectator* reviewed it in the number which appeared on the seventeenth of that month. In that periodical the critic had reached the conclusion that the production, so far as it had then come out, was the first number of a drama, which was called "Bells and Pomegranates." Such was his solution of the problem of the title. Accordingly, as this preliminary portion exhibited only part of a play, allowance must be made for it, as it would necessarily be the least stirring in its action and the least interesting in its passion. "Pippa Passes," therefore, it was the sapient conclusion, was not itself a drama, but scenes in dialogue without coherence and action. It was not devoid of good thoughts poetically expressed, was the conde-

scending admission, but these were perfectly ineffective from being in a wrong place. Crude as is this comment, its interest as a specimen of critical imbecility yields to the superior density of apprehension exhibited by the reviewer in *The Atlas*.[1] Why Pippa kept passing puzzled this literary judge sadly. He supposed it must be for some sinister purpose to be revealed later. Both these critics assumed the poem not to be an independent whole, but part of a larger work concealed under the general title of "Bells and Pomegranates," of the meaning of which they frankly acknowledged they had not the most remote suspicion.

The *Literary Gazette*, whose influence, however, was now dying out, did not notice the work at all; and *The Athenæum* delayed its criticism till about the end of the year. The reviewer had not wasted this long period of preparation. He really understood and appreciated the scheme of the poem which he justly characterized as remarkably beautiful. One gets from his notice, indeed, a fairly clear conception of the idea running through it. But even in his case the effect which had been wrought by "Sordello" was

[1] Number for May 1, 1841.

plainly visible. He began his criticism in a somewhat truculent way; yet his words are worth heeding, not for their truth, but for the exhibition they afford of the point of view which had begun to prevail even among those who had at first been disposed to regard the poet favorably. "Mr. Browning," he wrote, "is one of those authors, whom, for the sake of an air of originality and an apparent disposition to *think*, as a motive for writing, we have taken more than common pains to understand, or than it may perhaps turn out that he is worth. Our faith in him, however, is not yet extinct—but our patience *is*. More familiarized as we are, now, with his manner—having conquered that rudiment to the right reading of his productions—we yet find his texts nearly as obscure as ever—getting, nevertheless, a glimpse, every now and then, of meanings which it might have been well worth his while to put into English." [1]

These are the kind of notices which this most exquisite of poems received from the leading contemporary arbiters of public opinion. The estimate taken by the smaller fry of critics may easily be guessed. But there had now begun to

[1] Number for December 11, 1841.

operate against the reputation of the poet something far worse than bitter attack. It was indifference. He was not censured, he was simply ignored. Not even that most powerful provocative to sale, a denunciation of the morality of "Pippa Passes," had any perceptible effect in increasing its circulation. The scene between Sebald and Ottima has always made a certain class of persons look askance upon the poem. At the time of its appearance, it awakened an occasional protest. The feelings of some of the critics were indeed profoundly outraged. "Nor does the moral tone," said the reviewer in *The Spectator*, "appear to be the kind likely to be tolerated on the stage and approved of anywhere. In one scene a young wife and her paramour discuss their loves, and the murder of the 'old husband' needlessly, openly, wantonly, tediously, and without a touch of compunction, sentiment, or true passion." This was the way in which appeared to this astute literary guide that tremendous scene in which sin, suddenly shown its own grossness, seeks death as the only expiation for guilt. It may be worth while, in consequence, to record the prophetic insight of the same gifted intellectual luminary who had discovered that

"Pippa Passes" was the first part of a play. The future story, he told us, was to turn upon the endeavor of monsignor, the prelate, to get his niece, brought up as a peasant, inveigled to Rome as a prostitute, in order that he might get possession of her property. Well was he entitled to add that the plot was a novelty.

The recognition which was given at the time to "Pippa Passes" was not essentially different from that which came to most of the seven other parts which made up the series of "Bells and Pomegranates." There was then, as always, a small band of devoted admirers. But the general public, even of the highly educated, was, and continued to remain, indifferent. In the numbers which followed were printed six regular plays—all, indeed, that Browning henceforth ever wrote. They were entitled "King Victor and King Charles," published early in 1842; "The Return of the Druses," published in April, 1843; "A Blot i' the 'Scutcheon" acted and printed earlier in the same year; "Colombe's Birthday," which appeared in the spring of 1844; and finally the plays of "Luria" and "A Soul's Tragedy," which made up the eighth and last number of the series. This came out in the

spring of 1846. Only two of these pieces have ever been represented on the regular stage. One was "Colombe's Birthday" which was acted seven times at the Haymarket Theater by Helen Faucit, during April and May, 1853, and later in the provinces. The other was "A Blot i' the 'Scutcheon," the story of which demands detailed examination.

A trustworthy account of the fortunes of this play is all the more important because the grossest misstatements about it have become current. They have indeed, become so current that there is no little danger of their permanent embodiment in literary history. The pity of it is that these misstatements owe their origin largely to Browning himself—I need hardly add, with no idea on his part of their fictitious nature. The production of "A Blot i' the 'Scutcheon" was in one respect an event in his life. It led to an estrangement between him and Macready. The great actor in consequence had no share in the performance of this tragedy, though it was brought out at his theater. The part he would naturally have taken was assumed by Samuel Phelps. According to Browning's statement it was his own personal dissatisfaction with the re-

luctance shown at first by Macready to appear in it which led him to insist upon the actor's substitute retaining his place in the play instead of yielding it to the manager who had apparently repented of his unwillingness.

This manifest reluctance to bring out the play accords little with the assertion now frequently made that Macready was constantly beseeching the poet to write plays for him to act. This on the surface is improbable, after his previous experience with "Strafford." It certainly receives no countenance from anything to be found in the actor's own diary. Browning's conduct on this occasion, as he afterward confessed, showed ignorance of the proper course to be pursued. But as he himself reports the circumstances, it evinced something more than ignorance. In the accounts given neither he nor any of his admirers seem to be struck by the assurance, to call it by the least offensive name, of a dramatic author presuming to dictate to a manager, who chanced also to be the leading English actor of his time, who should take the principal part in a piece brought out at the theater under his direction. To Macready himself it must have seemed unparalleled impudence.

But, whatever may be the opinion we hold as to the propriety of this action, there can be no dispute as to its impolicy. To have a new play brought out at Macready's theater, without Macready in it, was courting failure, no matter whether much or little money was spent on the accompaniments of its representation.

We are further to bear in mind in discussing this whole story that Macready's side of the differences which arose has never been given. In his diary there is little recorded beyond the fact that the play appeared. No comment, whatever, is made upon it. It looks as if all reflections in regard to it or to the incidents connected with its production had been carefully edited out of the work as published. On the other hand, Browning's side has appeared at least twice in what may be called an official form. One of these is in the shape of two private letters written by him in 1884 to the editor of the *London Daily News*. These were printed in full in Mrs. Sutherland Orr's life of the poet. The other is the "Personalia" of Mr. Gosse which originally came out as a contribution to the *Century Magazine* for December, 1881, but was reprinted in book form in 1890. This, we are assured, "was

inspired and partly dictated, was revised and approved of by (Browning) himself." It was read by him as published and received an acknowledgment implying its correctness.

These two sources of information may in consequence be properly looked upon as the author's own relation of certain incidents in his career. Both are therefore to be treated as of equal validity. There are, indeed, between them one or two irreconcilable discrepancies in regard to particular matters; but in the main the two authorities agree. In the "Personalia" Browning says that he was wont to be amused at the mixture of fact and fable given in what purported to be the story of his life. For it he had doubtless ample reason: yet the most ill-informed of contemporary biographers never succeeded in furnishing a more misleading report of any event in his career than he did himself in these two authorized accounts of one of his theatrical ventures. Southey used to spend a great deal of his time in explaining why his various epics had never had a sale. The very obvious reason seemed never to occur to him that men did not care to read them and consequently did not buy them. Much after the same fashion Browning

in his later years used to explain why his dramas had failed upon the stage; or rather he used to insist that they had not failed; that it was due to purely accidental causes that their career of triumph had been prematurely cut short. This was especially true of the fortunes of the tragedy called "A Blot i' the 'Scutcheon."

Accordingly let us contrast some of the assertions about this one play as made by Browning himself in the two authorities just mentioned with the facts as they really occurred. In considering them it is important to keep in mind that Macready closed his engagement at the Haymarket Theater on the 7th of December, 1841. Before doing so he had agreed to undertake the management of Drury Lane. This position he assumed and held for two seasons. It is evident from both the accounts which come from Browning that these two seasons were completely confused in his own mind. It is the first of which he is thinking; it is of the second he actually speaks. All this comes out distinctly the moment his assertions are compared with the facts.

Browing tells us that Macready accepted the play of "A Blot i' the 'Scutcheon" while he was engaged at the Haymarket and retained it for

Drury Lane. It was toward the close of 1841 —precisely speaking, on the night of December 27—that the actor opened his first season at the latter theater. If the poet's recollections can be trusted, his own play must accordingly have been written some time that year before the beginning of the first of these two seasons. He further tells us that when the season began at the latter theater, the manager informed him that he should produce his play when he had brought out two others—"The Patrician's Daughter" and "Plighted Troth." The former was the work of Westland Marston, the latter of a brother of George Darley. Yet we know from Macready's diary that he never even read the drama entitled "The Patrician's Daughter" until August 29, 1842. He consequently could not have told Browning in 1841 that his own play must wait for one which the manager had never seen, if, indeed, at that time, it had itself an actual being.

Browning tells us that after Macready took Drury Lane under his management he opened it on December 10. The year which he had in mind though not specified could have been no other than 1842. But in neither of his two sea-

sons did the manager open the theater on that date. As just mentioned, the first began on December 27, 1841; as for the second, it began October 1, 1842. Browning also tells us that the season was opened with Marston's "Patrician's Daughter." But "The Patrician's Daughter" was brought out during his second season, not his first. So far, too, was he from beginning this second season with it, that there had been nearly sixty performances before it came on. The date of December 10, 1842, given by him for this particular occurrence, is correct; but it is about the only correct thing to be found in the two accounts for which he is responsible.

Browning tells us that "The Patrician's Daughter" was removed from the stage to make way for "Plighted Troth." The last representation of the former play was the 20th of January, 1843. But "Plighted Troth" had been brought out during Macready's first Drury Lane season—precisely speaking, on April 20, 1842. Then it was most effectually damned. Though given out for the following night, it seems never to have been heard of again. It hardly needs to be said that neither Marston's play nor that of any one else could have given

way to one which had disappeared from the stage fully nine months before.

Browning tells us that "The Patrician's Daughter" had but a moderate success—a success of esteem, it is phrased. Macready wrote to him that it had failed in money-getting. Still it was acted at least ten times before it was withdrawn. Here it is to be said that under Macready's management an interval of one or more nights—more than one, as a rule—took place between successive performances of the same piece. Browning further gives us to understand that his own play, in spite of the manager's coldness, which had caused it to be maimed and mutilated and deprived of every advantage, was much more than a success of esteem. According to him, it was "a complete success"—as Macready himself declared it to be. He tells us that it was announced to be played "three times a week until further notice," and, moreover, that it "was performed with entire success to crowded houses until the final collapse of Macready's schemes brought it abruptly to a close." This, we are exultingly assured by his devotees, is the true story of a real triumph which erring critics, one after another, have chronicled as a defeat.

To confirm further this view Browning tells us that the play had the usual run. The facts are that it was brought out on Saturday, February 11, and was further acted on Wednesday and Friday of the week following. Then it was withdrawn permanently. Accordingly it was performed but three nights in all. But not even in the eighteenth century, when there were only two theaters, was three nights the usual run of a successful play. It was a distinct mark of an unsuccessful one. If the fortunes of Marston's play, which held the stage for ten nights, could be termed no more than respectable, what epithet ought to be applied to those of the one which lasted through three performances only?

Browning tells us his tragedy gave way to Macready's benefit. That benefit took place on Friday, February 24, 1843. The third and final performance of "A Blot i' the 'Scutcheon," was on Friday, February 17. There was manifestly no reason on this account for the hurried withdrawal from the stage of a successful piece. Furthermore, during this interval of a week, four plays had been performed. These were "She Stoops to Conquer," "Macbeth," "The Lady of Lyons," and "As You Like It."

Browning tells us that the theater closed a fortnight after Macready's benefit. This assertion would have been absolutely correct if for two weeks he had said sixteen. Macready's second Drury Lane season closed on the 14th of June with the performance of "Macbeth." To make the discrepancy of the facts with Browning's statement of the facts still more glaring, it is to be added that during this interval of four months the manager had tried his fortunes with two new plays. One of them was "The Secretary" of the veteran dramatist, James Sheridan Knowles, which was brought out on April 28; and the other the "Athelwold" of Mr. William Smith, which, printed a year before, had been chosen by Miss Faucit for her benefit on May 18. Both plays were received with tumultuous applause the first night. Both failed to attract audiences. Both were speedily withdrawn. Macready all this time was struggling with pecuniary difficulties. It is not likely that a manager so beset, whatever might be his personal feelings, would risk the chances with two new and untried plays while a third one, with which he could be sure of attracting large audiences, was suffered to remain unacted.

Browning tells us that until its withdrawal, "A Blot i' the 'Scutcheon" was performed to crowded houses. Contemporary evidence is so far from supporting this assertion that it contradicts it absolutely. There is a general agreement among the periodicals of all sorts then appearing as to the little favor with which the play was received. One quotation may be given which practically represents the universal opinion. This is from the review of the theatrical season just ended which can be found in the *London Times* of June 13, 1843. "On the 11th of February," it says, "a three-act play called 'A Blot i' the 'Scutcheon' made its appearance and was moderately successful the first night while it totally failed in attraction." This is essentially the view taken by the other periodicals, not even excluding *The Examiner*.

But a feeling seems to prevail among the modern partisans of Browning that anybody who is not wholly for him, not merely in the estimate of his genius but in the account of the incidents of his life, is so much against him that his words can not be trusted at all. Accordingly it may be advisable to cite here the testimony of one who at that period belonged to the inner circle of his

personal friends. This man is Joel Arnould, who subsequently went out to India to take the position of Judge of the Supreme Court at Bombay. He was equally a friend of another one belonging to this same circle, that Alfred Domett who was the subject of Browning's poem entitled "Waring." To him residing then in New Zealand, Arnould, in an undated letter, but manifestly belonging to 1843, furnished an account of the reception this particular play had met. In it he followed the accepted Browning view, now become traditional, which represents Macready as the devil behind the scenes who was maliciously bent on contriving the ruin of a play which thereby would have the effect of contributing further to his own financial ruin. "He did his best to wreck it," says one of the poet's biographers.[1]

Arnould gives a description of the first performance which I select particularly because it is far more favorable than that contained in any other contemporary record as yet published. "The first night," he wrote, "was magnificent. There could be no mistake about the honest enthusiasm of the audience. . . . Altogether the first night was a triumph. The second night

[1] "Robert Browning," by C. H. Herford, New York, 1905, p. 52.

was evidently presided over by the spirit of the manager. I was one of about sixty or seventy in the pit, and yet we seemed crowded when compared to the desolate emptiness of the boxes. The gallery was again full. The third night I again took my wife to the boxes. It was evident at a glance that it was to be the last. My own delight and hers too in the play was increased at this third representation and would have gone on increasing to a thirtieth; but the miserable great chilly house with its apathy and emptiness produced in us both the painful sensation which made her exclaim that she 'could cry with vexation at seeing so noble a play so basely marred.'"[1] Yet this enthusiastic friend who could have kept on going to the same performance thirty times pointed out that a new play produced at Macready's theater, with the foremost English actor taking no part in it, was foredoomed to failure. That one fact would suffice to repel numbers. Arnould further conceded that even had Macready taken part, the piece could never have become permanently popular.

I have brought here into sharp contrast Browning's statement of facts about the production of

[1] "Robert Browning and Alfred Domett," p. 66.

"A Blot i' the 'Scutcheon" with the facts as they actually are. Further minor conflicts with the eternal verities; further minor discrepancies between the two accounts for which he is responsible, lack of time and space compels me to disregard. In one of the two authorities here followed he is represented as asserting that he had kept silence for forty years while the stories of the failure of his play were in circulation. It would have been far better had he kept silence the rest of his life. From the intentional false witness of the wicked truth can be protected. How can we shield it from the unintentional false witness of the good? It is hardly possible to secure better evidence than that which came from Browning to establish the truth of what is demonstrably false. For he himself was simply incapable of making a statement which he knew to be untrustworthy, and especially one that would redound unjustly to his own credit. Yet we have had here to deal with a tissue of assertions of his, all honestly made and all having no foundation in fact. Yet because they have come from a man of highest character as well as of genius, his partisans have exhibited their loyalty at the expense of their judgment in accepting his contradictions

of previously accepted beliefs not only without question, but without the slightest attempt at verification. It has, indeed, been more than once exultingly proclaimed that these inaccurate assertions furnish proof positive that the common accounts of the ill success of his plays, once current, have received their death-blow and that all inferences derived from their assumed failure must be henceforth treated as erroneous and misleading.

No one, in truth, who has had occasion to refer to the history of this particular play, seems capable of making an accurate statement about it. From author down to auditor they tell us the most easily exposed untruths with a full conviction of their perfect conformity to fact. Let us take two striking illustrations of this condition of things. Mrs. Bridell-Fox, the daughter of the early friend and patron of Browning, gave in *The Argosy* of February, 1890, an account of the first performance of "A Blot i' the 'Scutcheon." She gave it, to use her own words, as she vividly recalled it. "In the play," she wrote, "Macready took the part of Lord Thorold, the elder brother, on the first night of its representation only. I well remember his noble bearing and dignified

grace. It was, however, produced by him in the later days of his management of Drury Lane, when worn out with fatigue and anxiety, he was unable to sustain the part, and handed it over to Mr. Phelps for the remainder of the nights the play ran." Here is a woman of unquestionable integrity and truthfulness recalling vividly the sight of something which she had never seen at the time specified nor at any time whatever; for Macready never in his life took the part of Thorold Lord Tresham.

Let us turn to another creation of the imagination, though in this instance based upon a foundation of fact. In 1844 Phelps, who was the original Lord Tresham, took upon himself the management of the Sadler's Wells Theater in Islington. There he made a great success, and there he remained nearly a score of years. In the fifth year of his management—specifically in November, 1848—he revived "A Blot i' the 'Scutcheon." His nephew and biographer gave to the Browning Society, in 1888, a glowing account of the favor it met at its reproduction. "It was played," he wrote, "four nights for an entire month (the run he usually gave a play produced by him at this period) to large and en-

thusiastic audiences, as I can testify, having been at the theatre the greatest part of each evening." [1] This, if true, would make at least sixteen performances during the period immediately following the revival. Yet records which can not be disputed show that it did not run for a month, but for two weeks only; and that during these two weeks it was acted not four times a week but three. Later in February, 1849, it was acted twice. This made eight performances in all during the whole season.[2] Here accordingly is testimony given in fullest sincerity by a man present who was in a position peculiarly favorable for ascertaining precisely what had occurred. Yet to the truth of what actually occurred, his statements have only a remote relation. If we can not trust his testimony as to the easily verified number of performances given, what confidence can we have in his testimony as to the largeness and enthusiasm of the audience assembled? The further fact that Phelps did not during his long management produce again

[1] Letter of W. May Phelps, dated March 3, 1888. Proceedings of Browning Society, Notes No. 147, p. 243.

[2] The play was acted at the Sadler's Wells Theater, Nov. 27, 28, and 29; and Dec. 7, 8, 9, in 1848; and on February 2 and 3, 1849.

the piece, in which at its first representation at Drury Lane he was generally regarded as having achieved distinct success, seems to indicate that he did not share in his nephew's view as to the number and zeal of those who were present at this revival.

There is indeed no question that the play, so far from being the complete success which Browning termed it, was a failure. Such was the view taken of its fortunes in all contemporary notices, whether friendly or hostile. In *The Examiner* Forster justly praised the tragedy as a work of rare beauty and as unutterably tender and passionate. Still he did not venture to predict for it anything but a short existence on the stage. That it succeeded fairly well the first night may be freely admitted. But the same thing is to be said of many pieces that then failed —in particular of the very two already mentioned which followed it the same season at the same theater. If contemporary evidence can be trusted, each of these was received the first night with more enthusiasm than was Browning's play. Yet each failed to attract audiences, each was speedily withdrawn. Their fate was the very one which befell "A Blot i' the 'Scutcheon."

At its original performance there was present a strong body of admirers, brought thither by personal regard for the author or impressed by the power and passion displayed in the poetry. But there was also a distinct minority of dissentients. We know that even on this first representation hisses were heard. "The author," says the report in *The Times*, "was called for at the conclusion, but there was quite enough of disapprobation expressed to account for his unwillingness to appear."

Up to this point the success of the play has been considered. Enough has been said to show that at its original representation "A Blot i' the 'Scutcheon" was a failure. The further question now arises, Ought it to have been a success? It must be kept in mind that we are not here discussing the work as a contribution to literature, but as an attempt at the dramatic representation of real life. We can concede willingly the fervor and fire and passion which characterize it in numerous places and drew from Dickens his enthusiastic tribute. We can further concede the opportunities which it affords and improves for affecting and tragic situations. But we are treating it here simply

as a work of art, as an exemplification of that drama, the aim of which, as its greatest exponent has told us, is to hold the mirror up to nature. This involves as a fundamental consideration the representation of life as it is, and of the men living it conducting themselves in the way we have reason and right to expect. The story taken as the groundwork of the drama may be as unreal and impossible as one found in the Arabian Nights. But that once accepted, what is required is that the personages should act as they would were it probable and true. But in no work produced by any great poet have these principles been more systematically violated, or rather defied, than in the play under discussion. The characters are influenced by motives no one could deem natural. They perform acts no one in his senses would look upon as rational.

To begin at the beginning, the plot itself of this play, dealing, as it does, with modern feelings and conventions, is something more than incredible. It outrages all conceptions of the probable, not to say the possible. Events that are represented as occurring have undoubtedly occurred and perhaps often; but they have never occurred under the conditions here given. There

is absolute incongruity between the characters of the persons portrayed and their acts. This comes out clearly the moment we detach ourselves from the play considered as literature, and contemplate it as a picture of human life. Take the very initial conception. Mildred, Lord Tresham's sister, a young and beautiful girl, has been concerned in a criminal intrigue with the young earl of Merton. They are intending to condone their guilt by marriage. At the very outset we have two persons depicted as possessed of the loftiest character and animated by the noblest feelings, furthermore desperately in love with each other, acting in a way that could never have happened in real life, had they been such as they are represented to be. There has been and there is nothing to prevent their union. They both belong to the same station in life. No differences exist between their families. There is no disparity of age. The alliance is not only a natural one, but suitable from every other point of view besides that of mutual love. There is no reason why the hero should not from the outset have wooed the heroine in the way of honorable marriage as he is represented as doing at the time the play opens.

Accordingly it may be fairly asked, why should the two have engaged in an intrigue of this sort? Why, before being concerned in it, has not this lofty-minded lover applied for the hand of the woman he cherished? In real life this would have been the inevitable course to follow. In the drama only one reason is given for his failure to take it. In his dying moments the earl tells the man who has slain him that it was fear of him, and of his surpassing reputation, of him the all-courted, the all-accomplished scholar and gentleman, that has deterred him from presuming to venture upon the daring step of asking for the hand of the woman he loved. Unfortunately this fear had not extended to another member of the family where it would have been much more in place. The timidity which trembled before man's austerity stood in no awe of woman's purity. What had kept him from seeking from the brother that which could have been had for the asking did not prevent him from engaging and succeeding in the effort to overcome the virtue of the sister.

Let us now turn to the other party in the affair. She is portrayed as an embodiment of purity. Such at least she is in the eyes of her

lover and of her nearest of kin. She is filled with most agonizing remorse for her guilt. Yet no more than her suitor could she have been ignorant of the fact that there were no insurmountable obstacles in the way of their union. Certainly the experiment of asking for her hand might have seemed to her well worth trying before sacrificing her honor. A woman perfectly pure at heart can indeed be made the victim of overpowering passion. But she would never be likely to cast aside maidenly reserve and virginal modesty on a slight pretext—least of all, on one so attenuated as this, that her lover felt a certain timidity about making an application for her hand in regular form.

Had the situation been different; had there existed between the two a passionate love to which circumstances had opposed an impregnable barrier; had there been between the families a hostility so bitter that the obstacles raised by mutual enmity were or appeared unsurmountable; had their positions in life been so different that a proposition of marriage on the part of the suitor would have seemed to her natural guardians to partake of the nature of unwarrantable presumption if not of actual insult: in such cir-

cumstances there would have been palliation for the conduct of the two in the eyes of the austerest, even though they refused to grant pardon. But not a single one of these mitigating details existed. The only defence the heroine makes for herself is conveyed in the simple phrase, "I had no mother." This, as it appears in the acting, is effective and tragic. But the point to be insisted upon in looking at this play as the work of a great dramatic exponent of human nature, and not merely as the work of a great poet, is that had the heroine been really of the character ascribed to her, she would not here have needed a mother. So far from yielding to the solicitations of her lover under the conditions represented as existing, it would have required nothing more than ordinary womanly reserve and purity to repel any proposition of the sort with something more than indignation. To take any other view is an insult to womanhood.

No argument can explain away this violation of the truth of life, no sophistry can reconcile the action of these two principal personages of the drama with the characters ascribed to them. Had the suitor been the sort of man he is represented to be, he would never have taken advan-

tage of the innocence and ignorance of a loving and trustful girl. Had in turn the heroine been the sort of woman she is represented to be, the temptation proffered would have been no temptation at all. Accordingly their previous conduct, as depicted by Browning himself, does not give the impression of persons hurried into the commission of sin by the stress of circumstances but rather of a wanton falling into it from the lack of principle. At the very outset therefore we are confronted by the fact that the whole action of the play hinges upon a situation for the existence of which there is no adequate reason. As if this were not enough, the behavior of the various personages of the drama is equally without reason. There is indeed a close consistency between the unreality of the plot and the fatuity of those who are employed to carry it on. The characters act throughout with a defiance of ordinary sense that it is almost impossible to conceive manifested by rational beings in real life.

Let us take one of the early incidents of the play. The lover has overcome his dread of Mildred's brother sufficiently to venture to apply for her hand in due form. He has been graciously,

even warmly, received. His addresses have been sanctioned by the head of the house. Nothing more is needed save formal acceptance of them by the woman who has yielded herself to him already. Both therefore are now fully assured that it is in their power to atone, so far as in them lies, for the past; that henceforth the earl can visit Mildred as her accepted and acknowledged lover. Only two days must pass—one day is all that is really necessary—and he can then claim openly, as his promised bride, the woman he loves. Certainly it would seem that during this brief interval they might refrain for the sake of their common future from doing the slightest act that would tend to bring about the revelation of their secret. The meeting in her chamber must always have been hazardous—so hazardous that its having remained so long undiscovered is one of the inherent improbabilities of the play which is lost to consideration in the view of the many greater improbabilities which abound in it. But now that perfect safety is in sight, there is surely no need of running further risk, no justification for it.

In real life, refraining from such further risk would unquestionably have been the course

adopted. In the play the thought of so common-sense a procedure seems never to have occurred to either of the lovers. The earl takes the occasion of the night succeeding the day of his acceptance by Mildred's brother to visit Mildred herself in her own chamber. As secrecy was all important, he would, in real life, have made his way to his destined haven in the profoundest silence. Instead he comes singing a song. The stage direction tell us that it is to be sung in as low a voice as possible. But however repressed in the delivery, if it reached the ears of the one to whom it was addressed, it was necessarily liable to reach the ears of others. Therefore, in real life it would never have been sung at all. It was poetry that demanded its utterance, not dramatic propriety. For it is a beautiful lyric. Too much can not be said in praise of its passionate intensity. Only it is not appropriate to the occasion. In the drama which sets out to represent life as it is, this was the time above all to avoid singing it.

Furthermore, the song, while not appropriate to the occasion, can not be regarded as altogether appropriate to the characters. It must have grated upon the feelings of some of the audience

—as a matter of fact we know that on the first night it did—to have the lover about to make a secret midnight visit to the chamber of the heroine salute her with its opening line,

"There's a woman like a dewdrop, she's so purer than the purest."

Pure at heart she may be conceded to be in spite of all that has happened. It would have been right for her lover to have so assured her in the privacy of the interview. But the song is as much addressed to the audience as it is to her it celebrates. Accordingly the view expressed in it could hardly have been deemed a compliment to the character of the women present. They might justifiably resent having it chanted to them almost defiantly that the girl who is represented as having been concerned in an illicit intrigue is actually purer than the purest to be found among them. It is no wonder that on the first night of its performance the play came near being wrecked on this particular scene. In spite of the fervor and beauty of the lyric there was manifested among the irreverent scattered through the audience a perceptible disposition to scoff.

But the untruthfulness of the play as a representation of real life does not stop at this point. To Lord Tresham is revealed the terrible fact that night after night Mildred has been visited in her chamber by an unknown man. She is reproached for her course by her agonized brother. She makes no attempt to deny her guilt, but absolutely refuses to disclose the name of her accomplice. At the same time she expresses her willingness to receive the Earl as her affianced bridegroom. Naturally her brother is horrified at the apparent intention to inflict an atrocious wrong upon an unsuspecting suitor, to commit an act which would bring dishonor upon him who suffered it and dishonor of a graver kind upon those who had carried it into execution. One can understand Mildred's refusal to reveal her lover's name, if she had made up her mind to expiate her sin by leading henceforth a life of solitary contrition. But this she has not the slightest thought of doing. So long therefore as she purposes to persist in her determination to marry the man who has offered himself, why not reveal the actual facts of the situation? Why not make it known that the applicant for her hand and the nightly visitor to her chamber are

one and the same person? It is not merely the natural course for her to pursue, in the circumstances it is the only one; and she resolutely refuses to pursue it.

Several defences have been pleaded for her unwillingness to make a revelation which is morally obligatory if she intends to enter into the purposed union. They have been put forth from the point of view of high art, and again from a profound philosophic view of human nature. The moment any one of these is scrutinized, it is felt to be an effort, futile as it is labored, to explain the unexplainable. But looked at from the author's point of view there is no difficulty in accounting for her silence. Had she revealed the name of her lover, the play would have had to come at once to an untimely end, or would have had to be furnished with an entirely different dénouement. The grossest improbabilities were therefore to be accepted to prevent the otherwise inevitable result.

Take again the next night. Mildred now knows that her secret has been discovered. She knows in consequence that any attempt to renew the visit to her chamber will be watched and will be watched by hostile eyes. She not only rec-

ognizes the danger, the author makes us aware that she recognizes it. When Guendolen, who has surprised her secret, mentions the renewed coming of her lover as possible, she exclaims, "he is lost." To prevent this calamity she could certainly have refrained from any act which would have the effect of luring him on to the destruction which in that event she foresees to be certain. In real life not to give the signal for his coming would have been the least thing she could do in order to avert the threatened peril. But in the drama an expedient so simple as this seems not to have occurred to her or to her adviser. So at midnight Mildred proceeds to transfer the lamp from the red square in the pointed glass higher up to the small dark blue pane. This is the appointed signal for her lover to come. He obeys and the result follows which any one above the capacity of an idiot would have foreseen must follow.

Nor do the other personages of the drama display the qualities which are supposed to characterize rational human beings. Guendolen, for instance, is represented as possessing fully a soundness of judgment which is mainly conspicuous by its absence in the acts of the rest.

She discovers by her own intuitive sagacity that Mildred's midnight visitor and her suitor are one and the same person. She knows that the brother has gone off in an agony of desperation and is lost to direct communication. Still she has her own lover, Austin, at command. To a certain extent therefore she is mistress of the situation. But she makes not the slightest effort to utilize the advantage of her position. Now that the truth is known, it is all-important that the earl should not repeat his absurd conduct of the night before in visiting Mildred's chamber. What does she do to prevent this visit? What effort does she put forth to warn the lover of what she must have recognized as his deadly peril? None at all. She takes no steps to hinder Mildred from setting the signal, she takes no steps to inform the earl of the risk he runs in obeying it. Her lack of resource has its counterpart in the conduct of the head of the house in forcing on the duel after he has learned that his sister's suitor is the real midnight visitor. Though his behavior is more explicable, it is not flattering to his sense. He further contributes an additional luster to his scutcheon by slaying a man who makes, as he recognizes himself, no real

attempt at defence. This is the final irrational act of a series of irrational acts in which each character has to conduct himself as unnaturally as possible to prevent the play from ending naturally.

All this violation of the truth of life was apparent to most men at the time, though it occasionally escaped the attention of some of the most keen-sighted. The necessities of the drama at times exact, or at any rate permit, the neglect of probability in the conduct of the characters. Still they do not require unhesitating and persistent defiance of it. Yet such is the course unflinchingly followed in this play. The possibility of the existence of the condition of things described in it at its opening puts of itself a sufficiently severe strain upon belief, or rather upon credulity, without the further persistent demands made upon it during the course of the action. As a matter of fact, we are in a world of unreal beings, powerfully portrayed, it is true; for the situations are often exciting, and the pathos of the piece is undeniable to him who can keep out of his mind the preposterous conduct of the characters. But the action all through lies out of the realm of probability, not to say possibility.

It is therefore out of the realm of the highest art. So little is there of that in it that the tragedy consists largely of a series of narrow escapes from arriving at a happy termination, and thereby becoming a comedy. From this fate nothing could have saved it, if a single one of the leading characters had chosen to act as he or she would have acted in real life. Those who dwell in the rarefied air of the emotional, or rather the hysterical, may find the behavior of the personages of the play worthy of approbation. Assuredly cold-blooded, hard-headed, and hard-hearted men of the world will feel that people who display so little sense ought to die, for they are not fit to live in any society made up of rational or even semirational beings.

IV

"BELLS AND POMEGRANATES"

"A SOUL'S TRAGEDY"—"LYRICS"—DECLINE AND REVIVAL OF BROWNING'S REPUTATION

Whatever may be the theoretical estimate privately entertained of the value of Browning's plays in themselves, the facts given in the previous lectures prove beyond dispute that as contributions to the acting drama the verdict of the public has never been in their favor. Not one of them has ever attained genuine success on the stage. You may, if you please, attribute this inferiority in drawing power to the superiority these pieces display as literature; though, it must be confessed that this is something of a reflection upon the continuous attraction for theater-goers which Shakespeare, adequately and even inadequately interpreted, has exerted for more than three centuries. Yet, even as literature most of Browning's plays do not occupy a high rank. Some of them are tender and delicate as is "Co-

lombe's Birthday"; some of them are tedious as is "Strafford." One of them—"The Return of the Druses"—has the excitement of a startling dénouement. But as a rule they interest the reader as little in the closet as those did the hearer which were acted upon the stage.

To this general criticism there is one exception. I refer to "A Soul's Tragedy," which with "Luria" made up the eighth and last number of the series of "Bells and Pomegranates." This is a drama which the poet had written two or three years before publication, apparently at a heat. Browning rivalled and even occassionally surpassed his most thorough-going partisans in the tendency he exhibited to prefer his poorest work to his best. For this particular play he naturally therefore had no great regard—an opinion which need not weigh heavily upon us, coming as it does from one who never ceased to think highly of "Sordello." Before showing the manuscript of it to his future wife, he described it to her as all sneering and disillusion. He was reluctant to print it; indeed, he was perfectly ready to destroy it and assured her in the fullest sincerity that if she said the word, it should be burned.

In truth, it gives one a most puzzling idea of Browning's mental processes to find that he thought this drama, which is conspicuous among his works for its clearness, was so obscure—so much more obscure than "Luria," for instance—that he declared that if the latter was *clearish*, the printing of the former would be an unnecessary troubling of the waters. He re-read it in February, 1846. His previous impressions about it were then fully confirmed. In consequence, he hesitated about including it in the series of "Bells and Pomegranates." Though there were several points in it which struck him as successful in design and execution, he came to the conclusion that it would be preferable to postpone its publication. Subject-matter and style, he thought, were alike unpopular. This was true, he said, even "for the literary *grex* that stands aloof from the purer *plebs*, and uses that privilege to display and parade an ignorance which the other is altogether unconscious of."[1] He was therefore disposed to reserve from publication, for the time being, this unlucky play, as he called it. In the case of a possible second

[1] "Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett," New York, 1899, vol. I, p. 470.

edition of the series it could then be quietly inserted in its proper place.

Great therefore was Miss Barrett's astonishment when the work was submitted to her for perusal. She was almost disposed to be indignant with its author for misleading her. "Now," she wrote, "I shall know what to believe when you talk of very bad and indifferent doings of yours." [1] She recognized at once the great excellence of the play. The correspondence between the two makes it clear that at heart she preferred it to "Luria," though she felt bound to defer sufficiently to her lover's judgment to accord to the latter a nominal superiority. But even so much concession as this was wrung from her, rather than cheerfully granted. "It is a work," she wrote, "full of power and significance, and I am not at all sure (not that it is wise to make comparisons, but that I want you to understand how I am impressed!)—I am not at all sure that if I knew you now first and only by these two productions—'Luria' and 'The Tragedy'—I should not involuntarily attribute more power and a higher faculty to the writer of the last." [2]

[1] "Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett," New York, 1899, vol. I, p. 540.

[2] *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 13.

In the conflict that went on between the duty of heeding her own judgment and the desire that urged her to defer to the taste of her lover, she felt compelled to qualify this admission. "Yet 'Luria' is the completer work—I know it very well," she added. Under the circumstances, it would be unjust to reckon up against her this indulgence in a mild form of mendacity.

The more familiar Miss Barrett became with the play, the more she was impressed with its vividness and vitality. She could at first hardly forgive Browning for terrifying her about its poorness and its obscurity. "The worst thing is," she wrote, "that I half believed you, and took the manuscript to be something inferior—for *you*—and the advisableness of its publication a doubtful case." [1] Later she gave renewed expression to her opinion. "It delights me," she wrote, "and must raise your reputation as a poet and thinker—*must*." [2] Browning himself was perfectly sincere in his depreciatory estimate of the work. He was equally sincere in the surprise he expressed at the liking she manifested for it. Fortunately this liking compelled its publication at the time. Unfortunately it was not

[1] "Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett," New York, 1899, vol. I, p. 541. [2] *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 34.

permitted to precede "Luria" in the number in which it was printed, and suffered then and perhaps has always suffered since from the influence of that somewhat depressing forerunner. As it further presents no difficulties of comprehension or construction, as it is a faithful portrayal of human nature, the poor opinion which Browning entertained of it has extended to many of his devotees, some of whom seem hardly aware of its existence.

"A Soul's Tragedy" deserves fully the praise which Miss Barrett gave it. Of all the dramatic writings of Browning, it is the one that unites consistency of plot with clearness of expression and a course of action that follows a line of natural development and is, therefore, in full accordance with the truth of life. The characters in it are characters we can all understand and appreciate. They are acted upon by influences we all recognize as potent, they are swept along by impulses which are daily affecting the lives of those about us. The general deterioration in conduct and motive of the hero, which constitutes the tragedy of the play, is the inevitable outcome to be expected of a character which had raised before itself an ideal up to which it was not fitted

to live; and its lofty pretension contrasted with its pitiful performance hardly needs to be accentuated by the cynical words of the papal legate, cool, sarcastic, piercing at a glance the shallow nature which strove to persuade itself that it was animated by high purposes. From the very outset of his appearance he intimates the inevitable failure and dishonor which are to wait upon the man who assumes the attitude of a lover of his country, while all the time he is eaten up with love of himself.

Before taking leave of the plays, it may be well to note that Browning, in no respect a follower of any school, in many respects a law unto himself, in his method of expression almost defiantly free from the trammels of the conventional—that Browning of all men should have been the only great writer of our day, at all events of our race, to deliver himself of his own accord into the bondage of the unities, and if not to accept fully that antiquated superstition, to be profoundly affected by it. He did not observe it indeed in his first play; he sometimes strained its requirements in his later ones; but in his secret soul he had a distinct hankering after it. It was sometimes impossible to carry through the action of

his drama within the limits required by this doctrine. Accordingly, he divided into two parts —as in "King Victor and King Charles" and in "A Soul's Tragedy"—what is really one play. So an artificial unity is gained at the expense of a natural one; for in each of these parts the action is limited to a single day. But this is really a concession to an outworn creed rather than the observance of any principle of art—for the plays as they are, are organic wholes, and neither part has any justification for its own existence without the existence of the other. In the case of "The Return of the Druses," "Colombe's Birthday," and "Luria" the action in each instance is limited to one day and one place. In "A Blot i' the 'Scutcheon" the stress of circumstances compels the extension of the time somewhat beyond the prescribed twenty-four hours. In general, the difficulties in which he involves himself by encumbering his motions with these fetters have been successfully surmounted; though in certain of them, and especially so in "Luria," there is always present to the mind the perpetually recurring flaw in the observance of the unities, the moral impossibility of the events taking place in the limited time in

which they are described as happening, and too often the physical impossibility. Why Browning should have voluntarily entered into a bondage which France had then flung off, it is not easy to say.

So much for the plays. But in the series of "Bells and Pomegranates" were two parts which have done more to make Browning's name a household word than perhaps nearly all his other poetry combined—at least, not more than one exception can be found in his later production. These two were the sixteen pages of "Dramatic Lyrics" which made up No. III, and the twenty-four pages of "Dramatic Romances and Lyrics" which made up No. VII. The former contained some of the best-known minor poems. These gave at the time to those who were beginning to lose faith in him a renewed assurance that his poetic power was of the highest quality, and needed only right direction to place him in the very front rank of authors then living. Forster's review in *The Examiner* of the first of these two numbers is so clear a proof of the harm which had been wrought to his reputation by the work upon which he had prided himself, that a few sentences of it are worth quoting. "If poetry,"

he wrote, "were exactly the thing to grind professors of metaphysics on, we should pray to Mr. Browning for perpetual 'Sordellos.' As it is, we are humble enough and modest enough to be more thankful for 'Dramatic Lyrics.' The collection before us is welcome for its own sake, and more welcome for the indication of the poet's advance in a right direction. Some of this we saw and thanked him for in his 'Victor and Charles,' much more in his delightful 'Pippa Passes,' and in the simple and manly strain of some of these 'Dramatic Lyrics' we find proof of the firmer march and steadier control. We were the first to hail his noble start in 'Paracelsus'; the 'Strafford' and 'Sordello' did not shake our faith in him; and we shall see him reach the goal." [1]

In this collection appeared that favorite poem for children as well as for persons of riper growth, "The Pied Piper of Hamelin." It had been written in May, 1842, for Macready's child. It is manifest that Browning himself either did not think much of it, or that he believed that it was not likely to increase his reputation. It was added at the last moment only because there were

[1] *Examiner*, Nov. 26, 1843.

some columns that had to be filled up for this particular number. It is under the circumstances a singular coincidence that "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," one of the most popular pieces by his future wife, was written at a heat to meet corresponding and similar unpoetical conditions. This same part also included several of his contrasted pieces of which the two entitled "Camp" and "Cloister" are perhaps the most familiar to readers. Here likewise appeared some perpetual favorites as "In a Gondola," "Waring," and "Through the Metidja to Abdel Kader." Indeed, there was hardly a piece in it not worth reading and remembering.

But fine as was this collection, it was even surpassed by the seventh number of the series, which bore as its title "Dramatic Romances and Lyrics." There are very few individual books of any author in our tongue which contain so many pieces of such sustained excellence. By Browning himself it was never surpassed as a whole. Outside certainly of the later collection entitled "Men and Women," no volume of his ever appealed to so wide a circle of readers of different tastes and temperaments. Six of the poems appearing in it had been published previ-

ously. Browning for some reason was always averse to bringing out his work in periodicals. Gratitude to Fox had induced him to contribute some of his early pieces to the *Monthly Repository*. He was now again led to overcome his dislike to this method of publication because of the sympathy he felt for the misfortunes of a fellow craftsman. Thomas Hood, already under the shadow of death, had established at the beginning of 1844 a magazine which bore his own name. Before six months had gone by, hemorrhage of the lungs had brought him almost to the grave. Though he rallied subsequently to some extent, he broke down completely at the end of the year and never left his bed till in May, 1845, he was taken from it to his tomb. In this condition of things, several friends of the dying man had come to his aid. Among these was Browning. During the year preceding Hood's death he contributed several pieces to his magazine. The last of these which appeared in the number for April, 1845, was "The Flight of the Duchess"; for with the death of the editor, the following month, the poet felt himself relieved from any further obligation.

It was part only of "The Flight of the Duch-

ess" which was then printed—exactly speaking, the first nine stanzas of the completed poem which now includes sixteen in all. Not till the publication of the "Dramatic Romances and Lyrics" was added the part containing the hunt and the scene with the gipsy. Curiously enough, we know from Browning's own words that not a line of this production as it first appeared, was written as he originally intended to write it. "As I conceived the poem," he said, "it consisted entirely of the Gipsy's description of the life the Lady was to lead with her future Gipsy lover—a *real* life, not an unreal one like that with the Duke. And as I meant to write it, all their wild adventures would have come out and the insignificance of the former vegetation have been deducible only—as the main subject has become now."[1] For one I confess to being delighted that Browning was somehow prevented from carrying out his original intention; that the description of the unreal life with the Duke has been actually portrayed, and has not to be deduced from something else; for the vivid description of it given by himself is worth far more

[1] "Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett," New York, 1899, vol. I, p. 139.

than all the deductions that could have been made by all the members of all the Browning societies that ever have existed or ever will exist.

Few there are of the nineteen pieces—or if the contrasted poems be counted separately—of the twenty-four pieces which constitute this collection that are unfamiliar not merely to special students of Browning, but to all lovers of English literature. They were shown to Miss Barrett in proof.[1] Their beauty and power surprised even her, disposed as she was to admire, and ready to find things admirable. "Now," she wrote, "if people do not cry out about these poems, what are we to think of the world?" That they should cry out there was no question; that they would cry out, there was every reason to expect; that they did not cry out, we know. There was even more than lack of appreciation; there was sometimes positive condemnation. Along with the censure of some professional reviewers, indeed, praise was bestowed upon them by others; but it was always praise accompanied with qualifications. Still notice of them, favorable or unfavorable, had little weight with the public. Working against Browning's rep-

[1] "Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett," New York, 1899, vol. I, p. 252.

utation was the indifference which I have previously pointed out as being something far more baleful than hostile criticism. If people had only been willing to read, they could not have failed to cry out; but they simply refused to read.

It is in truth hard for us now to comprehend how low for a long time was the estimate taken of Browning's achievement; how small was the circulation of his writings, especially in his own country; and how completely his reputation was then overshadowed by that of his wife. Mrs. Browning died in June, 1861. She is now as unduly depreciated as she was then unduly exalted; for up to the day of her death and for a number of years after she stood far higher in the estimation of the reading public than did her husband. This was true even of America, where his poetry met with much greater favor than it did in his own land. A singular and striking proof of how much larger was the measure she filled even here in the public eye deserves mention. Poe was not only one of the acutest of critics then living, but he had exceptional acquaintance with contemporary literature. In his review of Miss Barrett's volumes of 1844, he accorded to her superiority over every poet then

living with the single exception of Tennyson. One, indeed, would almost infer from his words that of her future husband he either knew nothing or thought little. "That Miss Barrett," he wrote, "has done more in poetry than any woman living or dead, will scarcely be questioned; and that she has surpassed all of her poetical contemporaries of either sex (with a single exception) is our deliberate opinion—not idly entertained, we think, nor founded on any visionary basis."

At the preference exhibited by readers for the poetry of his wife, Browning did not grieve. There were a few who then ranked him much above her; but in that limited number he was not himself included. He fully agreed with the general public as to the superiority of her work to his own. Doubtless his intense affection blinded his judgment; for there can be no question as to his sincerity. "The true creative power is hers, not mine," he said. In the abounding love and admiration he felt for her, and in his generous and unselfish devotion to the extension of her name and fame, he was perfectly content to take a second place in the estimation of the public. But what he resented and what he had a right

to resent was that he was accorded no place at all. In England the ignorance of his work and the poor opinion there entertained of it at that time seems now almost incredible. Not but in the worst of days he received that lofty praise from the few which is the sure forerunner of the large praise of the many. But among the many who gave him no recognition were comprised then the great majority of the most highly educated class. It included even those distinguished in letters. One can understand and forgive the neglect of certain of his productions. But not to these alone did men at that time turn a deaf ear. They turned as deaf a one to the magnificent pieces which had already been brought out and to others to be brought out later during the period of his unpopularity.

The proof of this condition of things does not consist merely in the small sale his works then had; though necessarily that is evidence not to be gainsaid or undervalued. Not one of his individual volumes ever went then into a second edition. It is, however, the incidental remarks of persons of high literary and social position that give us fuller glimpses of the absolute failure of Browning's contemporaries to recognize his

greatness as a poet. One or two pieces of testimony may be worth citing. Mary Russell Mitford was an intimate friend of Miss Barrett. In 1846 she wrote to a correspondent an account of her marriage to Browning. After speaking of the genius of the wife she went on to discourse in the following way of the husband. "He is a poet also," she said, "but I believe that his acquirements are more remarkable than his poetry, though that has been held to be of high promise." [1]

This was the sort of lukewarm appreciation which Browning received from even the most favorably disposed of the cultivated class, and that too after the series of "Bells and Pomegranates" had been published. Furthermore, the ignorance of him and the indifference to him seem to have increased as the years went by, instead of diminishing. The meager returns of sale furnished by his publishers Chapman and Hall, point very unmistakably to this fact. But we have even more direct evidence. In 1860 the noted philanthropist, Frances Power Cobbe, was staying at Florence. There she was in constant contact with the Brownings. While she felt

[1] "Life of Mary Russell Mitford," London 1870, vol. III, p. 204.

the highest admiration for the literary achievement of the wife, we have her own testimony that it never occurred to her or to any of her circle of associates that the husband was a poet worth considering. In her autobiography she records the obtuseness of herself and her friends. "At that time," she says, "I do not think that any one, certainly no one of the society which surrounded him, thought of Mr. Browning as a great poet, or as an equal one to his wife, whose 'Aurora Leigh' was then a new book. The utter unselfishness and generosity wherewith he gloried in his wife's fame perhaps helped to blind us, stupid that we were! to his own claims." [1]

We know now that Browning felt keenly the injustice with which he was treated. We learn much about his attitude from his wife's correspondence. Her resentment of the neglect he experienced was greater than his own; at least it has reached us more definitely. "To *you*," she wrote to Browning's sister in 1860, "I may say, that the blindness, deafness, and stupidity of the English public to Robert are amazing. Robert *is*. All England can't prevent his existence, I suppose. But nobody there, except a

[1] "Life of Frances Power Cobbe," Boston, 1890, vol. II, p. 343.

small knot of pre-Raffælite men, pretends to do him justice. Mr. Forster has done the best in the press. As a sort of lion, Robert has his range in society, and, for the rest, you should see Chapman's returns; while in America, he's a power, a writer, a poet. He is read—he lives in the hearts of the people." The contrast between the estimate in which she and her husband were held in their own country and the feeling entertained about them in this, she expressed with a good deal of bitterness. "For the rest," she continued, "the English hunt lions too, but their favorite lions are chosen among 'lords' chiefly, or 'railroad kings.' 'It's worth *eating much dirt*,' said an Englishman of high family and character here, 'to get to Lady ——'s soirée.' Americans will eat dirt to get to *us*. There's the difference." [1]

A year later Mrs. Browning records an instance of the ignorance prevailing about her husband and his work which, did it come from any other source than herself, it would be hard to credit. It occurs in a letter sent to her sister-in-law from Rome in 1861. In it she speaks again of the atti-

[1] "Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning," New York, 1898, vol. II, p. 370.

tude of his countrymen toward her husband and his sense of its injustice. "His treatment in England," she wrote, "affects him naturally—and for my part I set it down as an infamy of that public—no other word. He says he has told you some things you had not heard, and which, I acknowledge, I always try to prevent him from repeating to any one. I wonder if he has told you besides (no, I fancy not) that an English lady of rank, *an acquaintance of ours* (observe that!) asked, the other day, the American Minister whether Robert was not an American. The Minister answered, "Is it possible that *you* ask me *this?* Why, there is not so poor a village in the United States where they would not tell you that Robert Browning was an Englishman, and that they were very sorry that he was not an American.' Very pretty of the American Minister—was it not?—and literally true besides." [1]

Undoubtedly the popularity of Browning in this country was exaggerated by his wife to give point to the contrast. But there is no question that the reading public in England remained for a long time scandalously indifferent to his

[1] "Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning," New York, 1898, vol. II, p. 436.

achievement and showed but slight appreciation of its greatness. The fact of the neglect must be conceded. Is there any explanation of it, any palliation for it? Is there in particular any ground for the charge of unnecessary and wilful obscurity of meaning and harshness of versification, which whether really existing or merely asserted to exist militated constantly against the acceptance of the poet as poet? Browning himself was from the beginning well aware of his reputation for lack of clearness. In a letter sent in April, 1845, to his future wife he remarked that something he had written to her previously was "pretty sure to meet the usual fortune of my writings—you will ask what it means." At times this complaint of obscurity afforded him matter for jest. He was fond of repeating a remark of Wordsworth about his marriage to Miss Barrett. "I hope," said the veteran poet, "that these young people will make themselves intelligible to each other, for neither of them will ever be intelligible to anybody else." The woman soon to be his wife admitted her own liability to this charge of obscurity. Occasionally too she herself found her future husband unintelligible. "People say of you and me," she wrote to him in the begin-

ning of their acquaintance, "that we love the darkness and use a Sphinxine idiom in our talk." She went on to make a personal application of this view to something which he had been writing to her. "Really," she said, "you do talk a little like a Sphinx." [1]

But Browning, though in a modified way he conceded his obscurity, denied that it was intentional. Occasionally, indeed, he resented an accusation of this sort. "I can have but little doubt," he remarked in a private letter belonging to 1868, "but that my writing has been, in the main, too hard for many I should have been pleased to communicate with; but I never designedly tried to puzzle people, as some of my critics have supposed." [2] Later, in 1872, in the preface to the selection then published of his poetical works, he declared himself innocent of "the charge of being wilfully obscure, unconscientiously careless and perversely harsh." There is indeed, no justification for the belief that these faults were intentional; but though unintentional, that they might be and were un-

[1] "Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett," vol. I, p. 53.

[2] "Letters of Robert Browning," London, privately printed, 1895, vol. I, p. 26.

necessary, it never entered his mind to conceive; for while he did not purpose to be obscure, he felt under no obligation to strive to make himself intelligible, at least easily intelligible.

In a further passage of the privately printed letter just cited, Browning exhibited his utter inability to comprehend the nature of the problem which even the greatest of geniuses must solve who desires the suffrages of the public. "I never pretended," he wrote, "to offer such literature as should be a substitute for cigars or a game of dominoes to an idle man." The self-sufficiency of this view is as astounding as its futility. He may not so have intended it; but it is the natural, almost the inevitable inference from the words, that those who gave him up because they found him difficult to comprehend must belong to the class who look upon literature as merely the amusement of an idle hour. At times, indeed, one gets the impression from some of his utterances that he was almost disposed to resent having said anything that could be understood at once. This is indeed a view largely taken by his disciples. But if they do not know it, Browning himself could hardly have failed to see that no charges of such a nature have been brought

against poets as great as he and even greater. For instance, no one has found fault for a reason of this sort with Chaucer or Milton or Wordsworth. No one further ever spoke or thought of their poetry as a substitute for a cigar or a game of dominoes.

The subject is so important and the treatment of it has often been so confused that it may be well to have the nature of this problem distinctly presented. Obscurity in an author arises from two causes. It may be owing first to the novelty, depth or loftiness of his speculations which either range outside of the common track, or ascend to regions up to which the ordinary intellect finds it difficult to follow. Clearness of comprehension always assumes, too, a certain amount of special knowledge or a certain degree of mental development on the part of the hearer or reader. What to one man may require the most labored explanation and then be only imperfectly understood, may convey its meaning to another at a glance. As the current of our life deepens and broadens, as it absorbs into itself new experiences and new sensations, as it gains new perceptions and enters into new states of mind, things which once seemed vague or incomprehensible come to

stand out before us in distinctest outline. They do so because they express precisely what we have at last come to learn or to feel. Through mental growth or perhaps more often through sad experience meanings previously obscure are clearly revealed to the inner consciousness.

This is to say that we always have to be prepared, intellectually or morally, for what we receive. The greatness of Shakespeare grows upon us as we advance in years, because we find in him so much that in earlier days we had passed over without regard or comprehension for the reason that it was beyond the reach of our intellects or outside of the lessons of our experience. Accordingly, that in any given instance we did not or do not enter into the full meaning of his words or of those of any other profound writer, is no more an argument against the art or genius displayed or the clearness and intelligibility of its utterance than the inability of a child to understand a philosopher is proof that he is incomprehensible; or of a beginner in mathematics to understand the integral calculus is satisfactory evidence that it is absurd. Either the intellect is not sufficiently developed, or the requisite preliminary knowledge of the subject treated is

lacking; or both these may contribute to the failure to perceive. In such cases the writer must not merely seem obscure, he must be obscure. But in neither case is it any fault of his own.

But there is another kind of obscurity arising from the inability or neglect of the author to render himself intelligible. The thought, as he has come to see it, may strike him as perfectly clear; but he fails to fulfil the first duty of a writer, which is to take mentally the place of the reader whom he addresses; to have distinctly in his mind how what has been uttered will appear to him who necessarily lacks the subtle chain of association which in his own case has connected thought and expression. That which has come uninvited to the one in flashes of inspiration must be supplied to the other by the agency of reflection and study. All exertion of this kind which is unnecessary ought to be spared to the reader. The author who is unwilling to perform his duty in this respect has no right to complain when those, even of highest cultivation, refuse to do for him the labor which he has no business to impose. In a world full of choicest literature that is comprehensible, it is inevitable that men will meet the difficulty of

understanding such a writer by the easy device of not reading him.

In Browning's case the obscurity is due to the operation of both these agencies. Both have acted and will continue to act as hindrances to familiarity with his writings and consequently to the extension of his popularity. There is no question as to his profound intellectual power. He was, as Tennyson called him, "the greatest-brained poet in England." He therefore demands special study. He demands it the more because it is not depth of thought which so peculiarly characterizes his utterance as its many-sidedness and unexpectedness. The entirely novel point of view from which old ideas are presented, the entirely new light in which things familiar are made to show themselves, these constantly impress the mind and not infrequently startle it, utterly overthrowing, as they do, all preconceived opinion. Yet the moment any one of these revelations is brought fully to our knowledge, we feel something more than its justness. The sense of its obviousness comes over us at the same time. Though we should never have dreamed of it ourselves, we are, none the less, surprised that it has not occurred to us.

Out of many illustrations let us take for examples three such well-known poems as "The Glove," and "Clive," and "Bishop Blougram's Apology." In the first the suitor leaps into the arena full of hungry wild beasts and at the risk of his life picks up the glove his mistress has purposely dropped. He secures it, returns in safety, and flings it in her face. We sympathize at first with the act of the man in thus publicly rebuking the heartless selfishness of the woman who exposes her lover to the needless risk of death for the sake of gratifying her vanity. But how unexpectedly and yet convincingly the poet shows the woman's intention to test and reveal the shallowness of the devotion professed by the suitor who avows his readiness to run all conceivable risks for her sake and then resents being called upon to do no more than the poor captors of the beasts are willing to encounter for a mere pittance of money.

Take again the duel between Clive and the officer whose cheating at cards he has denounced. We admire the courage of the young clerk who looks death defiantly in the face, but refuses to retract his accusation. To Browning alone could have occurred the recognition of the

ground which the conscience-stricken gamester could have assumed; and instead of doing as he did, of what he could have said but did not say; but which if he had said would, as Clive himself confesses, have left him no other alternative than to atone for his accusation by taking his own life. Or consider the conversation or rather monologue in which Bishop Blougram discusses the question of faith with Gigadibs, the literary man, who had publicly doubted the former's genuine acceptance of the belief he avowed and preached. One can not well get rid of the feeling that in this marvellous piece of dialectics there is lurking a fallacy. The poet himself implies it in his final words. But to most of us it is a feeling, not a conviction. To the ordinary intellect there seems no escape from the remorseless logic with which the great bishop rolls out his mind and overwhelms Gigadibs. There are those indeed who profess to have unravelled the strands of falsehood which are interwoven with the truth in this remarkable poem; but they have done little else than reveal their inability to answer difficulties whose existence they do not perceive. They seem possessed by the belief that denunciation of Blougram's motives and char-

acter is an all-sufficient answer to his reasoning.

For the sake of the numerous surviving members of the never-dying family of Gigadibses, I can not but regret that Browning was not led to set forth in another poem the opposite point of view. A criticism of the work in which this particular piece occurred came out in a Roman Catholic review not long after its publication. It was thought by the poet to have been written by Bishop Blougram himself, that is by Cardinal Wiseman. [1] The ascription of it to him is a good deal more than doubtful; in fact it is highly improbable. But while the Cardinal's authorship of it would assuredly add to the interest taken by the reader, it would add little to the interest of what was written. The reviewer termed this poem satirical and impertinent. He resented the unworthy motives imputed to the bishop and the defence he is made to give of a self-indulgence which every honorable man would feel to be disgraceful. None the less was he impressed and even secretly pleased by the triumphant way in which the prelate is made to dispose of his critic.

[1] "Letters of Robert Browning," privately printed, London, 1895, vol. I, p. 68.

The work as a whole led him indeed to take a hopeful view of the poet's spiritual condition. His article concluded with this specially charitable utterance: "If Mr. Browning," he wrote, "is a man of will and action, and not a mere dreamer and talker, we should never feel surprise at his conversion." [1]

But there is something else essential to the equipment of the poet besides greatness of intellect. There is something else essential to poetry besides novelty or profundity of thought. Important as these are, there are other characteristics just as important. The poetry created to endure must have felicity and charm of expression, independently of the ideas it seeks to convey. Otherwise it has no superiority to prose. In some of these needed qualities Browning is often lacking to an extent rarely exhibited in the case of any other writer of the first rank. If his virtues are extraordinary, so are his limitations. There is comparatively little in him of that flawlessness of form, that propriety of diction, that use of words to clothe the idea not to disguise it, that horizon clear from haze which a modern

[1] *The Rambler, a Catholic Journal and Review*, new series, vol. V, p. 54, January, 1856.

poet has designated as the distinctive qualities which have rendered the literature of Athens immortal. With Browning strength was but rarely accompanied with grace. To his failure in these respects was largely due the failure of his general acceptance. As if the variety and profundity of his ideas were not enough to prevent the ordinary reader from giving them the painful attention they need for their full comprehension, he frequently constructed his sentences so as to render difficult, if not to thwart wholly, the efforts of the reader to get any understanding of their purport. The involved constructions, the dislocated sentences, the abrupt transitions, all impose a burden upon him which makes it hard for him to follow easily the train of thought. Furthermore, the mind is apt to be called away from the consideration of the meaning by having its attention distracted by rugged versification, by out-of-the-way rymes, by peculiarities of expression that even in the more perfect pieces jar now and then upon the literary sense and detract from the exquisiteness of the workmanship displayed.

This formlessness, this ruggedness, this obscurity are faults lying on the surface. They are

so obtrusive that no one can miss them, so repellent to many that they are deterred from pursuing farther a quest which opens so unpromisingly. For years these characteristics of his poetry worked steadily against the recognition of the poet. They cause the same attitude to be taken toward him now save with those who have come to consider and celebrate his uncouthness as art of the highest order; for there is no limit to the intrepidity of a Browning enthusiast. His thought, always worth considering, often profound, frequently failed to get itself clothed in adequate expression. This peculiarity is most noticeable in the pieces in which the intellect is acting as the pure intellect and not under the stress of emotion. You are interested in the idea, you are at times lured on by the quaint manner in which the idea is expressed or illustrated. But this ought not to be the aim of the poet as poet. His business is not to startle and surprise, still less to puzzle and perplex, but to instruct and inspire; and he will never do the last work effectively, he will never be recognized for all time as having done it effectively who fails to appreciate the fact, and to act upon it, that an essential characteristic of the highest poetry is

the form which gives it distinction. Gold found in quartz rock may have as much intrinsic value as when it has been smelted and coined; but it can never come into general current use.

This view of Browning does not represent the attitude of hostile critics, but of personal friends. Take the case of Mrs. Browning herself. In love for the man and in admiration for the poet she could hold her own with the most ardent of the present generation of his female disciples. But neither depth of affection nor loftiness of estimate deprived her of her critical faculty. More than once she charged him with perplexing readers by presuming their knowledge of what he knew, but which in some cases they could not possibly know, or in other cases could not fairly be assumed to know. She objected also to the frequent roughness of his versification. There was in him a tendency—almost a habit, she observed—to make his lines difficult to read. "Not that music is required everywhere," she wrote, "but that the uncertainty of rhythm throws the reader's mind off the *rail* and interrupts his progress with you and your influence with him." [1]

[1] "Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett," New York, 1899, vol. I, p. 134.

A critical view, essentially of the same sort, was expressed by Landor, one of the warmest of his friends and one of the first to recognize his genius. As early as 1836, in his "Satire upon Satirists," he had hailed Browning as a poet. Yet he found the same difficulty in his writings which has caused perplexity to the rest of mankind. "I only wish he would atticize a little," he wrote early in the forties. "Few of the Athenians have such a quarry on their property, but they constructed better roads for the conveyance of the material."

This tendency to roughness and awkwardness of expression seems to have been inherent in Browning's nature. It would certainly have been lessened and might perhaps have been extirpated by rigid training in his early years. Instead it was confirmed by the desultory education he received. As a result it became in time practically impossible for him to effect any genuine correction of his own works. What changes he made—and in some pieces they were fairly numerous—were of the nature of slight additions or omissions, or of variations, none of which contributed anything worth speaking of to clearness of comprehension. For the most part, the ideas

once put forth, no matter how vaguely or crudely or clumsily expressed, continued to remain in the form in which they originally appeared. Jowett, with whom Browning stayed at the Oxford Commemoration in 1887, in commenting upon him to a correspondent, pointed out clearly the nature and origin of the distinguishing peculiarities of his style. "He is a very extraordinary man," wrote the Master of Balliol, "very generous and truthful, and quite incapable of correcting his literary faults, which at first sprang from carelessness and an uncritical habit, and now are born and bred in him. He has no form, or has it only by accident when the subject is limited. His thought and feeling and knowledge are generally out of all proportion to his powers of expression." [1]

Along with this carelessness went the most extraordinary self-confidence, and, it is to be added, a self-satisfaction which never hesitated at self-assertion. His sensitiveness to criticism became keener as time went on. It kept pace indeed with the continuing if not growing crabbedness and roughness of his later verse. It al-

[1] Letter to Lady Tennyson in, "Alfred Lord Tennyson, A Memoir by his Son," New York, 1889, vol. II, p. 344.

most seems at times as if this were resorted to as a sort of proclamation of defiance to those who had found fault with him for the manifestation of these qualities. He affected, indeed, to scoff at his censurers. Had he been really indifferent, he would never have gone to the trouble of parading his scorn. The resentment he felt was indeed distinctly visible and sometimes lamentably displayed. Tennyson, as we all know, was abnormally sensitive to criticism; but he never made any such deplorable public exhibition of the feeling as did Browning in "Pachiarotto." It must always remain a marvel how any man in full possession of his senses, let alone a man of genius, could have perpetrated the dreadful doggerel of that poem, where the wretchedness of the reasoning finds its fitting counterpart in the wretchedness of the expression. Not much better is the shallow defence he made for his method of writing in the epilogue to the volume bearing that title. It is one of the highest of tributes to Browning's essential greatness that his reputation could emerge unscathed from those two distressing struggles to be jocose and satirical.

Many, perhaps most, of the things which stood in the way of his immediate and general accept-

ance by his contemporaries were remediable. Yet he was almost disposed to resent the suggestion that he should take any steps to remedy them. When Tennyson occasionally rallied him upon the harshness of his rhythm and the length and obscurity of his poems, he had but one answer. "I cannot alter myself," he would say; "the people must take me as they find me." This is a perfectly justifiable attitude for him to assume who is totally indifferent to the opinion of the public; but he who assumes it has no right to complain if the public chooses not to take him at all. It is assuredly not the attitude of him who fixes his eye on either present or future fame; and Browning was far from being indifferent to either. So little indeed was he regardless of contemporary popularity that he craved it and felt the denial of it to himself as a grievance and an injustice.

He was fortunate enough, however, to outlive this period of neglect. The reputation of a genuinely great poet may be delayed; but it is certain to come at last. Men could not remain forever indifferent to the genius displayed in Browning's work, whatever fault they might find with its methods of manifestation. As time went on

he steadily made his way into the appreciation of a slowly enlarging circle of admirers; and his greatness was conceded even by those who censured most severely his shortcomings. The welcome which waited upon the publication of "The Ring and The Book" in 1868–69 proved clearly the increase of the estimation in which he had come to be held. Browning seemed to think that the comparative success of this work, the result of a slowly but steadily rising reputation, was due mainly to its length. He said at the time that he had gained at last the ear of the public, but he had done so by vigorously assaulting it, and telling his story four times over.[1] Knowledge of many abstruse things Browning possessed; but he never discovered that men accepted him in spite of his faults and not because of them.

It was not remarkable success indeed that he then gained; but as compared with the neglect he had previously endured, it was distinctly noticeable. The acceptance he had at last secured would have continued to strengthen and extend itself of its own accord; but owing to ad-

[1] "Personal Remembrances of Sir Frederick Pollock," London, 1887, vol. II, p. 202. Diary under date of April 3, 1869.

ventitious circumstances popularity came to him, a little more than half-a-score of years later, with a fulness which he had no reason to expect and which as a matter of fact we know that he did not expect. His last days were cheered by the ample if tardy recognition which was given to his genius. I have said that from the beginning he had been the favorite of a few. He was now to become a favorite of the many. The way had been slowly preparing for him when the one agency came into play that effectually broke up the indifference of the general public. This was the formation of the Browning Society in 1881, established mainly by the efforts of the late Frederick James Furnivall. This society with the innumerable branches which sprang from it all over England and America, worked not merely a reform in the poet's favor, but a revolution. It caused his name to be carried far and wide as a household word to every place where literature was known at all, and, it must be added, to no small number of places where it had never been known before, and with the gradual decay of the temporary interest aroused has never been heard of since.

There are authors to whom it would seem a

questionable compliment to have societies organized under their name, whose duty it was, among other things, to ascertain the meaning of what they had been saying. Such a society, in the case of a living writer, seems to partake of the nature of an anachronism. Its very existence tends to prove in him who is made the subject of comment and investigation the existence of the very faults from the possession of which he is to be defended. Clearly no thought of this nature ever presented itself to Browning's mind. He was delighted with the efforts taken in his behalf as well as astounded by their success. "You very well know," he wrote to Furnivall, in October, 1881, "I can say nothing about this extraordinary halo of rainbow hues with which your wonder-working hand has suddenly surrounded my dark orb. As with the performances of the mosaicists I see at work here—all sorts of shining stones, greater and smaller, which hardly took the eye by their single selves—suddenly coalesce and make a brilliant show when put ingeniously together—as my dazzled eyes acknowledge, pray believe." [1]

[1] Letter of Oct. 21, 1881, in "Letters of Robert Browning," privately printed, 1895, vol. I, p. 86.

We can all rejoice that this late deferred tribute of recognition came to cheer the closing years of the poet. He was no longer obliged to address the English public, as he did near the beginning of "The Ring and The Book," with the words "Ye, who like me not." Browning died rejoicing in the fulness of his fame. Gratifying as is the fact, there is hardly any question that much of the sudden and wide-spread popularity secured by the agency just described, was due to something else than appreciation of his genius as a poet. Accordingly, the reputation he thus acquired was largely factitious. As far as it is such, it has no element of permanence. It was not based primarily upon regard for his writings as literature. The rapid growth of the interest taken in them, after once being set in motion, owed its existence and extension to the men who looked upon them as furnishing materials for investigation and decipherment and not as a source of delight and inspiration.

For Browning is supremely the poet of intellectually acute but unpoetical natures. Not but there are men possessed of exquisite literary taste with whom he is not merely a favorite author but the favorite author. What I am try-

ing to bring out is that a very large proportion of the ablest of his thorough-going partisans are much more remarkable for general mental activity than for special literary sensitiveness. The things they admire in him are not those which appeal to the feelings, but those which deal with the reason. No one will deny the value of the poems in which this latter characteristic is predominant—sometimes so predominant in his case as practically to exclude the former. But there are many who will deny their supreme value. Striking thoughts are often in them which impress the mind; fine passages, sometimes, which linger in the memory. But too generally lacking in them is that intense fire, that passion which fuses thought and feeling into felicity of expression which is the envy and despair of the imitator. The verse which exercises and delights the intellect but fails to touch or inspire the heart may in many respects be worthy of the greatest admiration; but it will never take rank as the highest form of poetry.

It is not to be denied, however, that the haziness which envelops much of Browning's utterance piques curiosity in many minds of a high order and imparts to much of his work a peculiar

interest of its own. There is, furthermore, a certain class of men who fully believe that obscurity is an essential element of profundity. Browning's frequent ambiguity and uncertainty of meaning renders it possible for such persons to find in his words whatever acute intellect or addled brain chooses to look for. They are thereby enabled to read into his work their personal conclusions and beliefs, and make him give his sanction to views of their own which they deem peculiarly profound. The proceedings of the various Browning Societies furnish interminable and inconclusive discussions of what he might have meant but did not mean inevitably. One of them, duly recorded, is worth citing as an illustration. A member of the original Browning Society—one conspicuous enough to be chosen to preside at its first meeting—read later a paper before it in which he set forth a certain interpretation of the poem entitled "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." This was called in question by the founder of the Society. On this very matter he said that he had consulted the poet himself who had three times uttered an emphatic "No" to the theory which had just been propounded. Against any such method of as-

certaining the author's sense, the proclaimer of the controverted view protested. If they were to adopt the policy of consulting the poet himself as to the meaning he sought to convey, there would be, he insisted, no need of any Browning Society at all.[1]

But efforts to give clearness of outline to what is doubtful and perplexing neither implies nor necessitates enjoyment of Browning's poetry as poetry. Still less is such appreciation of it involved in the many vague discourses written about it or certain portions of it by men who find a natural outlet for thoughts above the reaches of their souls in language beyond the comprehension of the ordinary mind. Not even is it necessarily indicated in much of the valuable work which has been given up to the explanation of his words and phrases, to the disclosure of recondite allusion, to the clearing up of difficulties of construction. Too much cannot be said in praise of the utility and importance of labor of this nature. But it is in no proper sense the study of literature. It is the same sort of study as that which leads men to the perusal of the

[1] Monthly Abstract of Proceedings of the Browning Society. Meeting of May 24, 1882, p. 26.

works of Homer and Virgil, not for the sake of their poetry but for the light they throw upon disputed points of inflection and syntactical construction. A great deal of the interest that has been manifested in Browning investigation is far higher in degree, indeed, but it is not essentially different in kind from that displayed in guessing the answers to riddles or deciphering the enigmatical representation of words in the figures found in rebuses; or, if a more dignified comparison be desired, from that employed in the solution of intricate mathematical problems. All this is to say that much of the study given to the poet is not the study of literature. In it exercise of the understanding has been demanded, not gratification of the taste nor appreciation of the work of the creative imagination.

If there be justice in this view it follows that a good deal of the vogue which Browning's poetry suddenly gained was not due to the attraction which it exercised as literature. That was a subject to which a large proportion of his new admirers were comparatively indifferent. They were not specially susceptible to the charm of poetry as poetry. In the best representatives of this class the intellect had been developed out

of all proportion to the taste. Such men are not especially drawn to writers in whom loftiness of speculation has found its fitting counterpart in clearness and beauty of expression. To this class belongs the large number of active but unformed minds. Accordingly, with a body of young and promising students, it would as a general rule be much easier to arouse interest in Browning than in almost any other great author of our speech. The genuine enjoyment of Milton or Wordsworth or Tennyson presupposes, as a fundamental condition, the existence of a certain degree of fondness for literature as literature. But this is ordinarily one of the last results of cultivation. Naturally, for it such persons are in general unprepared. Unquestionably, enjoyment of this precise sort is inspired by Browning's best production. But he presents also a body of poetry of which this cannot be said. The study of it does not demand nor does it develop literary appreciation. But it does require keen intellectual acuteness. The exercise of the latter is the sort of work in which young men of quick minds but undeveloped taste can easily be made to take delight. It is all the more satisfactory to them because while they are do-

ing little more than unravelling the meaning of linguistic puzzles or dragging an idea to light from its misty hiding-place, they honestly believe that the interest they take in what they are reading is due to their enjoyment of it as poetry pure and simple.

The formation of the Browning Society therefore counteracted to some extent the good it did to the extension of his reputation by placing an obstacle in the way of its permanence. As his poorest work was generally his obscurest, to that much of the attention of his professed disciples was devoted. It was largely diverted from that portion of his production which does not need the exploitation of organized bodies to discover and appreciate its beauty and power. Browning's best poems occasionally present puzzles; his poorest frequently present little else; at all events, the most interesting thing about them is the puzzles. Accordingly, these are the pieces which arouse the enthusiasm of certain of his partisans. To them disproportionate importance is attached. To the explanation of the hidden meaning found in them painful research is given up. The disciples celebrate the poet not for what is clearly and vividly expressed but for

what is vague and perplexing. Hence mere Browning societies were found inadequate; so Sordello societies were formed and flourished. Commentaries were produced which, so far as I can judge from my own struggles with some of them, possess a peculiar interest of their own in having achieved the seemingly impossible task of being more difficult to understand than the texts they set out to interpret. In fact, commentaries on Browning generally bear a close resemblance to foghorns. They proclaim the existence of fog; but they do not disperse it.

It need not be denied, however, that obscurity has its advantages for the idolater, if not for the being idolized. It constitutes those who devote themselves to the interpretation and exploitation of the generally unintelligible a class by themselves. Nothing so conducive to the sense of superiority has ever been devised. The members of this inner circle of disciples intimate always and sometimes assert that it is only for mental and spiritual athletes like themselves to grapple with the problems of life and conduct which Browning sets before us. Accordingly, they feel justified in assuming an air of compassionate condescension to the grosser denizens of

the lower literary world, the intellectual outcasts who prize most in the poet what is comparatively easy to read and to understand. They look upon themselves as an elect body. To them belongs a higher mental development, a clearer spiritual vision. The more puzzling the production, the keener is their enjoyment of it, the loftier is their estimate of it. It is in works of this character that Browning reserves himself for them. In these he does not lower himself to the mean capacities of the common mind. To the chosen band alone is it given to recognize him there as he is, the seer, the revealer of the mysteries of nature and of life, the bearer of a divine message to his generation. It must always remain a matter of regret, however, that the ability given to these esoteric disciples to penetrate into the mystery of Browning's meaning has not been accompanied with a corresponding ability to put into intelligible speech what they have brought back from that upper air of speculation to which their strong-winged thought has enabled them to soar.

If in these lectures I may seem to some to have laid too much stress upon what is imperfect and unsatisfactory in the art and achievement of a

great poet, it is because I sincerely believe that the exaggerated and unwarranted praise which has been given to a good deal of his work will set in motion a reaction which in turn will have the tendency to bring back the deplorable conditions of indifference to it and consequent neglect of it that waited upon it during a large share of his own life. A great author has a right to demand that he shall be judged by his best. If his poorest is forced upon us as peculiarly representative by those who set themselves up as his champions, disregard of the former is sure in time to follow. As coming generations recede more and more from Browning's day, they will tend more and more to revolt from the doctrine which designates a portion of his work as supremely intellectual and profound, because it is couched in uncouth verse and obscure phraseology. If this be made a point of belief, the circle of his readers will be steadily narrowed. The general acknowledgment of the greatness of his genius will never be threatened by the attacks of hostile critics; but it stands in some danger from the constant exaltation of his least satisfactory work by the most vociferous of his extreme partisans. The contemporary indifference manifested toward

him was largely his own fault; if in time coming there be return of this indifference, for it the unwisdom of his advocates will be mainly responsible.

For, as I look at it, so all-important in poetry is the expression of the thought, that when the thought is great but the expression unsatisfactory, that very fact removes it out of the realm of the highest literary achievement. Accordingly, I venture to take the ground that in the future a great mass of Browning's verse will have but a very limited body of readers and a still more limited body of admirers. It is because I do not believe that there is any lasting pleasure in formlessness, any genuine vitality in inarticulate phraseology, that I express here a view which is opposed to that which has of late had wide acceptance. Poems of his there are which will never cease to be cherished so long as English literature endures. Still with his works as with those of other writers nature in the end will assert her rights. The verse of his which will last longest, which will reach the widest circle, which will meet everywhere with the keenest appreciation will be, as it has been, that which offers fewest difficulties either in the way of compre-

hension or of diction. The poems of Browning that will carry his name down to remotest posterity will be those that are the least representative of him in the eyes of no small number of his present admirers.

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